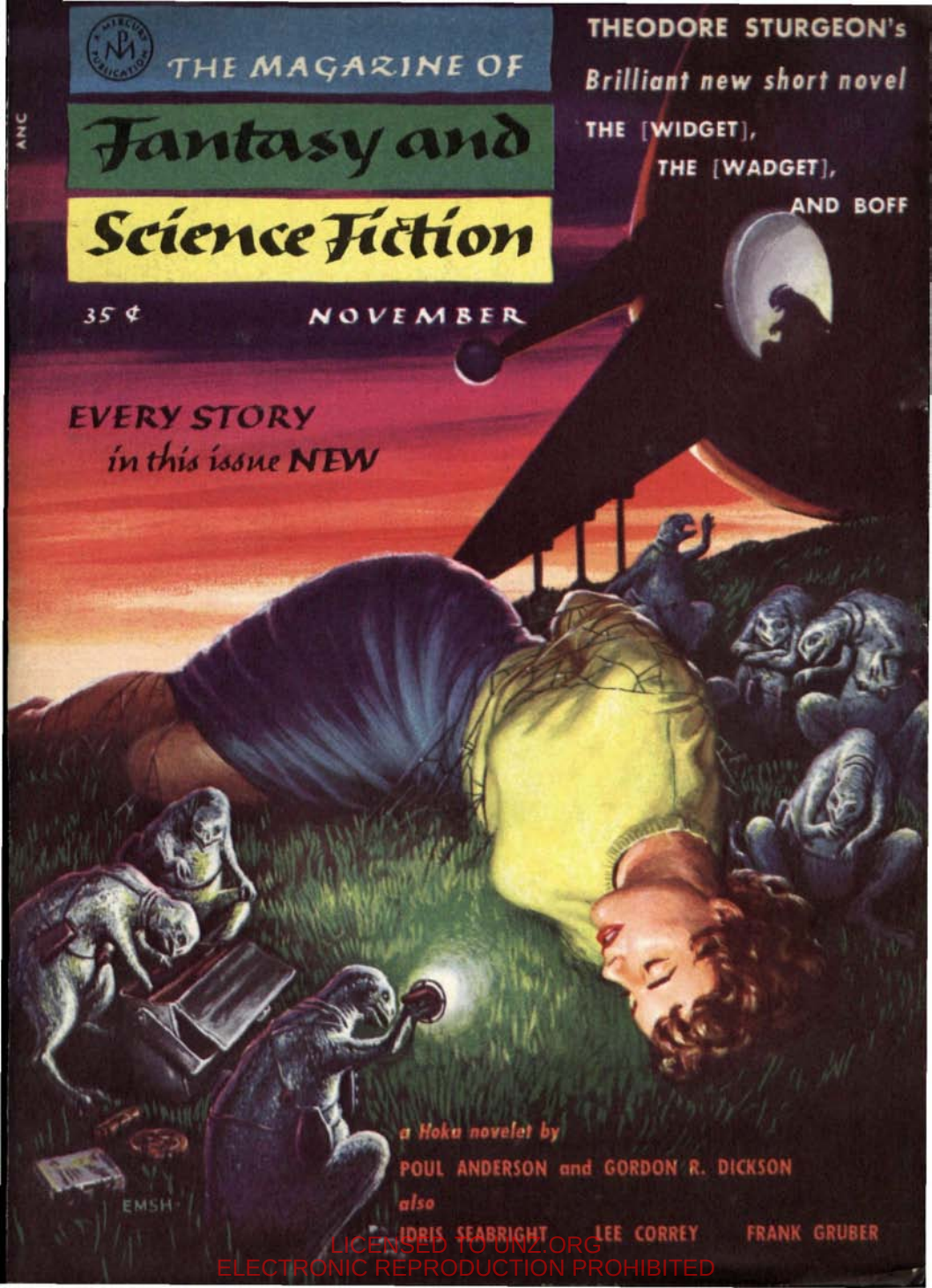

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Science Fiction Marches On . . .

The rising popularity of science fiction among the cultural leaders of the nation, as well as among the people at large, is ample testimony of its vitality and maturity. Engineers, physicians, chemists, statesmen, educators – they have all found pleasure and enlightenment in science fiction.

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 9, No. 5 NOVEMBER

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Critics frequently complain, with not a little justice, that the greatest lack in science fiction is characterization, the full-bodied development of living people. No writer has done more to answer that charge than Theodore Sturgeon; and this new and curiously titled short novel is, to my taste, one of the finest pieces of work that even Sturgeon has yet accomplished, comparable only to his MORE THAN HUMAN *in the richness and depth of its character-creation. You're about to meet a fascinating and real group of people; and in their company you'll live through an absorbing story, learn a new aspect of Alien Observation . . . and even come to know the nature of those devices which our language can only approximately render as [widget] and [wadget].*

The [Widget], The [Wadget], and Boff

by THEODORE STURGEON

(First of Two Parts)

THROUGHOUT THE CONTINUUM AS WE know it (and a good deal more, as we don't know it) there are cultures that fly and cultures that swim; there are boron folk and fluorine fellowships, cupro-coprophages and (roughly speaking) immaterial life-forms which swim and swirl around each other in space like so many pelagic shards of metaphysics. And some organize into super-entities like a beehive or a slime-mold so that they live plurally to become singular, and some have even more singular ideas of plurality.

Now, no matter how an organized culture of intelligent beings is put together or, where, regardless of what it's made of or how it lives, there is one thing all cultures have in common, and it is the most obvious of traits. There are as many names for it as there are cultures, of course, but in all it works the same way — the same way the inner ear functions (with its contributory synapses) in a human being when he steps on Junior's roller skate. He doesn't think about how far away the wall is, some wires or your wife, or in which direction: he *grabs*, and, more often than not, he *gets* —

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accurately and without analysis. Just so does an individual reflexively adjust when imbalanced in his socio-cultural matrix: he experiences the reflex of reflexes, a thing as large as the legendary view afforded a drowning man of his entire past, in a single illuminated instant wherein the mind moves, as it were, at right angles to time and travels high and far for its survey.

And this is true of every culture everywhere, the cosmos over. So obvious and necessary a thing is seldom examined: but it was once, by a culture which called this super-reflex "Synapse Beta sub Sixteen."

What came out of the calculator surprised them. They were, after all, expecting an answer.

Human eyes would never have recognized the device for what it was. Its memory bank was an atomic cloud, each particle of which was sealed away from the others by a self-sustaining envelope of force. Subtle differences in nuclei, in probability shells, and in internal tensions were the coding, and fields of almost infinite variability were used to call up the particles in the desired combinations. These were channeled in a way beyond description in earthly mathematics, detected by a principle as yet unknown to us, and translated into language (or, more accurately, an analog of what we understand as language). Since this happened so far away, temporally, spatially, and culturally, proper nouns are hardly proper; it suffices to say that it yielded results, in this particular setting, which were surprising. These were correlated into a report, the gist of which was this:

Prognosis positive, or prognosis negative, depending upon presence or absence of Synapse Beta Sub Sixteen.

The pertinent catalog listed the synapse in question as "indetectible except by field survey." Therefore an expedition was sent.

All of which may seem fairly remote until one realizes that the prognosis was being drawn for that youthful and dangerous aggregate of bubbling yeasts called "human culture," and that when the term "prognosis negative" was used it meant *finis*, the end, zero, *ne plus ultra* altogether.

It must be understood that the possessors of the calculator, the personnel of the expedition to Earth, were not Watchers in the Sky and Arbiters of Our Fate. Living in our midst, here and now, is a man who occupies himself with the weight-gain of amebae from their natal instant to the moment they fission. There is a man who, having produced neurosis in cats, turns them into alcoholics for study. Someone has at long last settled the matter of the camel's capacity for, and retention of, water. People like these are innocent of designs on the destinies of *all* amebæ, cats, camels and cultures; there are simply certain things they want to *know*.

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This is the case no matter how unusual, elaborate, or ingenious their methods might be. So — an expedition came here for information.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK][1]. [VOLUME] ONE: CONCLUSION.

. . . to restate the obvious, [we] have been on Earth long enough and more than long enough to have discovered anything and everything [we] [wished] about any [sensible-predictible-readable] culture anywhere. This one, however, is quite beyond [understanding-accounting-for]. At first sight, [one] was tempted to conclude immediately that it possesses the Synapse, because no previously known culture has advanced to this degree without it, ergo . . . And then [we] checked it with [our] [instruments] [! ! !] [Our] [gimmick] and our [kickshaw] gave [us] absolutely negative readings, so [we] activated a high-sensitivity [snivvy] and got results which approximate nonsense: the Synapse is scattered through the population randomly, here non-existent or dormant, there in brief full activity at [unheard-of] high levels. [I] thought [Smith] would go [out of [his] mind] and as for [myself], [I] had a crippling attack of the [ ]s at the very concept. More for [our] own protection than for the furtherance of the Expedition, [we] submitted all our data to [our] [ship]'s [computer] and got what appeared to be even further nonsense: the conclusion that this species possesses the Synapse but to all intents and purposes does not use it.

How can a species possess Synapse Beta sub Sixteen and not use it? Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense!

So complex and contradictory are [our] data that [we] can only fall back on a microcosmic analysis and proceed by its guidance. [We] shall therefore isolate a group of specimens under [laboratory] control, even though it means using a [miserable] [primitive] [battery]-powered [wadget]. [We]'ll put our new-model [widget] on the job, too. [We]'ve had enough of this [uncanny, uncomfortable] feeling of standing in the presence of [apology-for-obscenity] paradox.

I

The town was old enough to have slums, large enough to have no

[1] TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *Despite the acknowledged fact that the translator is an expert on extra-terrestrial language, culture, philosophy, and the theory and design of xenological devices, the reader's indulgence is requested in this instance. To go into detail about these machines and the nature and modes of communication of the beings that operate them would be like writing the story of a young lover on the way to his reward, springing up his beloved's front steps, ringing the bell — and then stopping to present explicit detail about circuitous wiring and dry, dry cells. It is deemed more direct and more economical to use loose and convenient translations and to indicate them by brackets, in order to confine the narrative to the subject at hand. Besides, it pleases the translator's modesty to be so sparing with his [omniscience].*

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specific "tracks" with a right and a wrong side. Its nature was such that a boarding house could, without being unusual, contain such varied rungs on the social ladder as a young, widowed night-club hostess and her three-year-old son; a very good vocational guidance expert; a young law clerk; the librarian from the high school; and a stage-struck maiden from a very small small town. They said Sam Bittelman, who nominally owned and operated the boarding house, could have been an engineer, and if he had been, a marine architect as well, but instead he had never risen higher than shop foreman. Whether this constituted failure or success is speculative; apply to a chief petty officer of top sergeant who won't accept a commission, and to the president of your local bank, and take your pick of their arguments. It probably never occurred to Sam to examine the matter. He had other things to amuse him. Tolerant, curious, intensely alive, old Sam had apparently never retired from anything but his job at the shipyards back east.

He in turn was owned and operated by his wife, whom everyone called "Bitty" and who possessed the harshest countenance and the most acid idiom ever found in a charter member of the Suckers for Sick Kittens and Sob Stories Society. Between them they took care of their roomers in that special way possible only in boarding houses which feature a big dining table and a place set for everyone. Such places are less than a family, or more if you value your freedom. They are more than a hotel, or less if you like formality. To Mary Haunt, who claimed to be twenty-two and lied, the place was the most forgettable and soon-to-be-forgotten of stepping stones; to Robin it was home and more: it was the world and the universe, an environment as ubiquitous, unnoticed, and unquestioned as the water around a fish; but Robin would, of course, feel differently later. He was only three. The only other one of the Bittelman's boarders who breathed what was uniquely the Bittelman quality as if it were air was Phil Halvorsen, a thoughtful young man in the vocational guidance field, whose mind was on food and housing only when they annoyed him, and since the Bittelmans made him quite comfortable, in effect they were invisible. Reta Schmidt appreciated the Bittelmans for a number of things, prime among which was the lengths to which her dollar went with them, for Miss Schmidt's employers were a Board of Education. Mr. Anthony O'Banion permitted himself a genuine admiration of almost nothing in these parts. So it remained for Sue Martin to be the only one in the place who respected and admired them, right from the start, with something approaching their due. Sue was Robin's widowed mother and worked in a night club

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as hostess and sometime entertainer. She had done, in the past, both better and worse. She still might do better for herself, but only that which would be worse for Robin. The Bittelmans were her godsend. Robin adored them, and the only thing they would not do for him was to spoil him. The Bittelmans were there to give him breakfast in the mornings, to dress him when he went out to play, to watch over him and keep him amused and content until Sue rose at 11. The rest of the day was for Sue and Robin together, right up to his bedtime, when she tucked him in and storied him to sleep. And when she left for work at 9 P.M., the Bittelmans were there, safe and certain, ready and willing to cope with anything from a bladder to a blaze. They were like insurance and fire extinguishers, hardly ever used but comforting by their presence. So she valued them . . . but then, Sue Martin was different from most people. So was Robin; however, this is a truism when speaking of three-year-olds.

Such was the population of Bittelman's boarding house, and if they seem too many and too varied to sort out all at once, have patience and remember that each of them felt the same way on meeting all the others.

II

A pawnshop is a dismal place. A pawnshop in the rain. A closed pawnshop in the rain, on a Sunday.

Philip Halvorsen did not object. He had a liking for harmony, and the atmosphere suited him well just now, his thoughts, his feelings. A sunbeam would have been an intrusion. A flower shop could not have contributed so much. People, just now, would have been intolerable.

He leaned his forehead against the wet black steel of the burglar-proof gate and idly inventoried the contents of the window and his thoughts about them. Like the window and its contents, and the dark recesses inside, his thoughts were miscellaneous, cluttered, captured in that purgatory of uselessness wherein things are not dead, only finished with what they have been and uncaring of what will happen to them and when. His thoughts were binoculars without eyes, cameras without film, silent guitars and unwound watches.

He found himself approving more of the guitars than the two dirty violins hanging in the window. He almost wondered why this should be, almost let the question disappear into lethargy, and at last sighed and ran the matter down because he knew it would bother him otherwise and he was in no mood to be bothered. He looked at the instruments lazily, one, the other, analyzing and comparing. They had a great deal in common, and some significant differences. Having a somewhat sticky mind, to which

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windblown oddments of fact had been adhering for nearly 30 years now, he knew of the trial-and-error evolution of those resonance-chambers and of the high degree of perfection they had come to. Given that design followed function in both the violin and the guitar, and aside from any preference in the sounds they made (actually Halvorsen was completely indifferent to music anyway), then why should he intuitively prefer the guitars he saw over the violins? Size, proportion, number of strings, design of bridge, frets or lack of them, finish, peg and tailpiece mechanics — all these had their differences and all were perfect for the work they did.

Suddenly, then, he saw it, and his mind swiftly thumbed through the mental pictures of all the violins he had ever seen. They all checked out. One flickering glance at the guitars in the window settled the matter.

All violins have a scroll carved at the end of the neck — *all* of them. There is scrollwork on some guitars, none on others; it's obviously optional. The back-bending spiral at the end of a violin's neck is not optional, but traditional, and it has no function. Halvorsen nodded slightly and permitted his mind to wander away from the matter. It wasn't important — not in itself; only settling it was important. His original, intuitive approval of guitars over violins was not a matter of moment either; his preference for the functional over the purely traditional was just that — a preference.

None of this required much of Halvorsen's conscious effort or attention. The survey, the sequence, was virtually reflexive, and his thoughts moved as fish in some deep clear pool might move, hanging and hanging, fanning, then suddenly darting about with a swirl and a splash, to hang again fanning, alive and waiting.

He stood motionless, the fine rain soaking into the back of his collar and his eyes unseeking but receptive. Binoculars with mother-of-pearl; binoculars without. A watch with glass rubies in the face. Display cards: cheap combs, cheap wallets, cheap pens. An electric steam iron with a frayed cord. A rack of second-hand clothing.

Guns.

He felt again that vague dissatisfaction, set up a certain amount of lethargic resistance to it, and when it came through anyway he patiently gave it its head. He looked at the guns. What bothered him about the guns?

One had a pearl handle and rococo etching along the barrel, but that wasn't it. He glanced down the row and settled on a .38 automatic, about as functional an artifact as could be imagined — small, square, here knurled and there polished, with the palm safety and lock-safety just where they should be. And still he felt that faint disapproval, that dissatisfaction that spelt criticism. He widened his scan

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to all the guns, and felt it just as much. Just as little.

It was categorical then. It had to do with all these guns, or with all guns. He looked again, and again, and within this scope found no crevice for the prying of his reason, so he turned the problem on its back and looked again: what would a gun be like if it satisfied this fastidious intuition of his?

It came in a flash, and he hardly believed it: a flimsy structure of rolled sheet metal with a simple firing pin on a piece hinged and sprung like the business part of a rattrap. There was no butt, there were no sights. No trigger either; just a simple catch and — what was that? — and a piece of string. He visualized it sitting on a polished surface on a wire stand, its thin barrel angled upwards about 45°, like a toy cannon. Its caliber was about .38. The feature which struck him most was the feeling of fragility, lightness, in the whole design. Design! What would an object like that be designed *for?*

He looked again at the pawned guns. Among the things they had in common was massiveness. Breeches were cast steel, muzzles thick-walled, probably all rifled; parts were tempered, hardened, milled, designed and built to contain and direct repeated explosions, repeated internal assaults by hot hurtling metal.

It was as if a little red signal-light flickered on the concept *repeated.* Was that it, that all these guns were designed for repeated use? Was he dissatisfied with that? Why?

He conjured up the image of a single-shot dueling pistol he had once handled: long-barreled, muzzle-loading, with a powder-pan for priming and a chip of flint fixed to the hammer. To his surprise he found the little mental red light still aflicker; this was a design that displeased him too, somewhere in the area labeled *repeated.*

Even a single-shot pistol was designed to be used over again; that must be it. Then to him, a gun satisfied its true function only if it was designed to be used only once. *Enough* is the criterion of optimum design, and in this case once was enough.

Halvorsen snorted angrily. He disliked being led by rational means to a patently irrational conclusion. He cast back over his reasoning, looking for the particular crossroads where he must have taken a wrong turning.

There was none.

At this point his leisurely, almost self-powered curiosity was replaced by an incandescent ferocity of examination. Logic burned in Halvorsen as fury did in other men, and he had no tolerance for the irrational. He attacked it as a personal indignity, and would not let up until he had wrapped it up, tied it down, in the fabric of his understanding.

He let himself visualize the "gun" of his satisfied imagination, with its

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mousetrap firing mechanism, its piece of string, its almost useless flimsiness, and for a moment pictured police, cattlemen, Army officers handling such a ridiculous object. But the vision dissolved and he shook his head; the guns ordinarily used by such people satisfied his sense of function perfectly. He slipped (hypothetically) into the consciousness of such a man and regarded his gun — *a* gun — any gun with satisfaction. No, this seemed a personal matter, unlike the dissatisfaction everyone should feel (if they cared) about the extraordinary fact that automobiles are streamlined only where they show, and are powered by a heat-engine which is inoperable without a cooling system.

What's so special about my mousetrap gun? he demanded of himself, and turned his eye inward to look at it again. There it sat, on a polished surface — table-top, was it? — with its silly piece of string leading forward toward him and its muzzle tilted upward, unabashedly showing off its sleazy construction.

Why could he see how thin the metal of that muzzle was?

Because it was aimed right at the bridge of his nose.

Make a statement, Halvorsen, and test it. Statement: Other guns satisfy other men because they can be used over and over again. This gun satisfies me because it goes off once, and once is enough.

Test: A dueling pistol goes off only once; yet it can be reloaded and used again. Why not this? Answer: Because whoever uses a dueling pistol expects to be able to use it again. Whoever sees it used expects it will be used again, because the world goes on.

After Halvorsen's mousetrap gun went off, the world wouldn't go on. Not for Halvorsen — which of course is the same thing. "I am the core and center of the universe" is a fair statement for anyone.

So restate, and conclude: The optimum gun design is that which, having shot Halvorsen between the eyes, need no longer exist. Since *optimum* carried with it the flavor of *preferred performance*, it is fair to state that within himself Halvorsen found a preference for being shot to death. More specifically, for dying. Correction: for being dead — gladly.

Momentarily, Halvorsen felt such pleasure at having solved his problem that he neglected to look at the solution, and when he did, it chilled him far more than the fine rain could.

Why should he want to be dead?

He glanced at the racked guns in the pawnshop and saw them as if for the first time, each one very real and genuinely menacing. He shuddered, clung for a moment to the wet black steel of the gate, then abruptly turned away.

In all his thoughtful — thought-*filled* — life he had never consciously entertained such a concept.

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Perhaps this was because he was a receptive person rather than a transmissive one. What he collected he used on his external world — his job — rather than on himself. He had no need for the explanations and apologies, the interpretations and demands-to-be-heard of the outgoing person, so he had no need to indulge in self-seeking and the complicated semantics of ego-translation. He was rather a clearing-house for the facts he found, taking knowledge and experience from *here* and storing them virtually untouched until they could be applied *there*.

He walked slowly homeward, in a state that would be numbness except for the whirling, wondering core which turned and poked and worried at this revelation. Why should he want to be dead?

Philip Halvorsen loved being alive. Correction: He enjoyed being alive. (Question: Why the correction? File for later.) He was a vocational guidance worker employed by a national social service organization. He was paid what he should be, according to his sense of values, and thanks to the Bittelmans he lived a little better on it than he might otherwise. He did not work for money, anyway; his work was a way of thinking, a way of life. He found it intriguing, engrossing, deeply satisfying. Each applicant was a challenge, each placement a victory over one or more of the enemies that plague mankind — insecurity, inferiority, blindness and ignorance. Each time he looked up from his desk and saw a new applicant entering his cubicle, he experienced a strange silent excitement. It was a pressure, a power, like flicking on the master switch of a computing machine; he sat there with all relays open and all circuits blank, waiting for the answers to those first two questions: "What are you doing now?" and "What do you want to do?" Just that; it was enough for that indefinable sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to make itself known to him. And just as he had analyzed its source in the matter of guns, so he analyzed his clients. That flickering light signaling wrongness, misapplication, malfunction, misevaluation — all the flaws in design, the false goals, the frustrations and hurts of those who wonder if they have chosen the right vocation — that light burned on while he worked on each case, and would not go out until he found an answer. Once or twice he had wished, whimsically, that his imagined signal light would illuminate a sign for the client which said *Steeplejack* and for that one which said *Frog Farmer*, but it refused to be so obliging. It only told him when he was wrong. Being right involved laborious and meticulous work, but he did it gladly. And when at last he was satisfied, he frequently found that his work had just begun: to tell an eighty-dollar-a-week bank clerk that

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his proper niche is in freight-handling with a two-year apprenticeship at 50 is initially a thankless task. But Halvorsen knew how to be quiet and wait, and had become a past master at the art of letting a client fight himself, defeat himself, reconstruct himself, and at last persuade himself that the vocational counsellor was right. And all of it, Halvorsen liked, from the challenge to the accomplishment. Why, why should there be a wish in him to have this cease, to end the world in which all these intriguing problems existed? And to be glad of its ending?

What would he advise a client, a stranger, if that stranger blurted out such a desire?

Well, he wouldn't. It would depend. He would simply throw that in with everything else about the client — age, education, temperament, marital status, I.Q., and all the rest of it, and let the death-wish throw its weight along with all the other factors. It would, however, predispose him to conclude that the man was intolerably misplaced in some area: in a marriage, a family situation, a social beartrap of some kind . . . or his job. His job. Was he, Halvorsen, judge and arbiter of occupations — was he in the wrong job?

He slouched along in the rain, huddled down into himself to escape a far more penetrating chill than this drenching mist. So uncharacteristically wrapped in his inward thought was he that he had taken three steps on dry pavement before he became aware of it. He stopped and took his bearings.

He stood under the marquee of the smallest and cheapest of the town's four theaters. It was closed and dark, this being Sunday in a "blue-law" district, but dead bulbs and locked doors did not modify the shrillness of its decorations. Over the main entrance were two groups of huge letters, one for each of the two features on the bill. SIN FOR SALE, one shrieked, and the other blared back SLAVES OF THE HELLFLOWER. Under these was a third sign, offering as a special added attraction *Love Rites of a South Sea Eden*. From the sidewalk on the far left, up to the marquee, across and down the other side was an arch of cardboard cut-outs of women, wilting and wet, unnaturally proportioned and inhumanly posed, with scraps of ribbon and drape, locks of hair and induced shadows performing a sort of indicative concealment on their unbelievable bodies. Over the box-office was the stern advice: *Adults only! ! !* and papering the supporting pillars just inside the mirrored cavern of a lobby were still photographs of highlights of the pictures: A bare-backed female with her hands trussed to a high tree-branch, being whipped; a man standing, gun in hand, over a delectable corpse whose head hung back and down over the edge of a bed so that her carefully arranged hair swept

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the floor, and some flyblown samples of the South Sea Eden with the portraits of its inhabitants smeared strategically with rubber-stamp ink in angry and careless obedience to some local by-law.

At the best of times this sort of display left Phil Halvorsen cold. At the worst of times (up to now) he would have felt a mild disgust leavened by enough amusement at the out-house crudity of it to make it supportable — and forgettable. But at the moment things were a little worse than the worst had ever been before. It was as if his earlier unpleasant revelation had in some obscure way softened him up, opened a seam in a totally unexpected place in his armor. The display smote him like a blast of heat. He blinked and stepped back a pace, half-raising his hands and screwing his eyes shut. Behind the lids the picture of his ridiculous one-shot cannon rose up roaring. He thought he could see a bullet emerging from its smoking muzzle like the tip of a hot black tongue. He shuddered away from the millisecond nightmare and opened his eyes, only to get a second and even more overwhelming reaction from the theater-front.

My God, what's happening to me? he silently screamed to himself. He pounded his forehead with his fists twice, then put his head down and ran up the street, up the hill. His photographic eye had picked up the banner inside the lobby, and as he ran, part of him coldly read it:

SEE (in flaming scarlet) the big-city orgies

SEE the temptation of a teen-ager

SEE lust run riot

SEE the uncensored rites of an island cult

SEE . . . . SEE . . . . There was more. As he ran, he moaned.

And then he thought, at the Bittelmans there are people, it is light, it is warm, it is almost home.

He began to run to something instead of away.

III

The Bittelmans' kitchen was a vague "backstairs" area to O'Banion and a functional adjunct of the boarding house to Halvorsen; to Miss Schmidt it was forbidden ground which excited no special interest for that — almost all the world was forbidden ground to Miss Schmidt. In it Sue Martin was as content as she was anywhere, and among the torments of Mary Haunt, the kitchen was a special hell. But in Robin's world it was central, more so than the bedroom he shared with his mother, more so than his crib. He ate in the kitchen, played there when it was raining or especially cold. When he went outdoors it was through the kitchen door, and it was a place to come back to with a bruised knee, with a hollow stomach, with a sudden flood of loneliness or of a three-year-old's wild manic passion. It was

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big and warm and full of friends.

The most resourceful of these friends was, of course, Bitty, who without ever losing her gruffness knew the right time to apply a cookie or a story (usually about a little boy with a beautiful mother) or a swat on the bottom. Sam was a friend, too, mostly as something safe to climb on. Of late, O'Banion had carved a rather special niche for himself, and Robin had always liked a limited amount of Miss Schmidt's self-conscious passiveness; she was a wonderful listener. He treated Halvorsen with cheerful respect, and Mary Haunt as if she did not exist. There were other people, too, every bit as much so as anyone who ate and had a job and occupied rooms elsewhere in the house. There was the electric mixer and the washing machine — in Robin's economical language "Washeen" — the blendor and the coffeepot; in short, everything which had a motor in it. (The presence or absence of motors in percolators is arguable only by those with preconceptions.) To him they were all alive, responsive and articulate, and he held converse with them all. He showed them his toys and he told them the news, he bade them goodby and good morning, hello, what's the matter, and happy birthday.

And besides all these people, there were Boff and Googie, who, though by no means limited to the kitchen, were often there.

They were not there on that dark Sunday while the sky grieved and Halvorsen fought his personal devils outdoors. "Mits-ter, Boff an' Googie gone for ride," Robin informed the electric mixer. Its name, Mits-ter, was identical in his vocabulary with "Mister" and was a clear link between the machine and the males he heard spoken of, and just another proof of the living personality he assigned to it. He got a kitchen chair and carried it effortfully over to the work-table, where he put it down and climbed on it. He tilted the mixer up and back and turned its control-cowling, and it began to hum softly. Bitty kept the beaters in a high drawer well out of his reach and let him play with the therefore harmless machine to his heart's content. "*Ats* right, Mitster," he crooned. "Eat your yunch. Hey, Washeen!" he called to the washing-machine, "Mitster's eatin' his yunch all up, I go' give him a cookie, he's a *good* boy." He revved the control up and down, the machine whining obediently. He spun the turntable, turned the motor off, listened to the ball-bearings clicking away in the turntable, stopped it and turned on the motor again. He turned suddenly at the nudge of some sixth sense and saw O'Banion in the doorway. "Goo' morning Tonio," he called, beaming. "Go picnic now?"

"Not today, it's raining," said O'Banion. "and it's 'good afternoon' now." He crossed to the table. "What you up to, fellow?"

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"Mitster eatin' his yunch."

"Your mother asleep?"

"Yis."

O'Banion stood watching the child's complete preoccupation with the machine. Little son of a gun, he thought, how did you do it?

The question was all he could express about the strangely rewarding friendship which flowered between him and Robin. He had never liked (nor, for that matter, disliked) a child in his life. He had never been exposed to one before; his only sibling was an older sister and he had never associated with anyone but contemporaries since he was a child himself.

Robin had caught him alone one day and had demanded to know his name. "Tony O'Banion," he had growled reluctantly. "Tonio?" "Tony O'Banion," he had corrected distinctly. "Tonio," Robin had said positively, and from then on that was inalterably that. And surprisingly, O'Banion had come to like it. And when, on the outskirts of town, someone had set up something called a Kiddie Karnival, a sort of miniature amusement park, and he had been assigned to handle land rentals there for his firm, he found himself thinking of Robin every time he saw the place, and of the Karnival every time he saw Robin, until one warm Sunday he startled himself and everyone else concerned by asking Sue Martin if he could take the boy there. She had looked at him gravely for a moment and said, "Why?"

"I think he might like it."

"Well, thanks," she had said warmly, "I think that's wonderful." And so he and Robin had gone.

And they'd gone again, several times, mostly on Sunday when Sue Martin was taking her one luxurious afternoon nap of the week, but a couple of times during the week too, when O'Banion had business out there and could conveniently pick the child up on the way out from the office and drop him again on the way back. And then, just for a change, a picnic, Robin's very first, by the bank of a brook where they had watched jewel-eyed baby frogs and darting minnows and a terrifying miniature monster that he later identified as a dragonfly nymph; and Robin had asked so many questions that he had gone to a bookstore the next day and bought a bird book and a wildflower guide.

Occasionally he asked himself *why?* What was he getting out of it? and found the answers either uncomfortable or elusive. Perhaps it was the relaxation: for the first time he could have communion with another human being without the cautious and watchful attention he usually paid to "Where did you go to school?" and "Who are your people?" Perhaps it was the warmth of friendship radiating from a face so disturbingly like the one which still intruded itself between his eyes and his work once in a while, and which was so masked and controlled when he encountered it in the flesh.

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And there had been the Sunday when Sue Martin, after having given her permission for one of these outings, had suddenly said, "I haven't much to do this afternoon. Are these excursions of yours strictly stag?" "Yes," he had said immediately, "they are." He'd told *her*. But — it didn't feel like a victory, and she had not seemed defeated when she shrugged and smiled and said, "Let me know when you go coeducational." After that she didn't put a stop to the picnics, either, which would have pleased him by permitting him to resent her. He found himself wishing she would ask again, but he knew she would not, not ever. And if he should ask her to come, and she should refuse . . . he could not bear the thought. Sometimes he thought the whole business of amusing the child was done to impress the mother; he had overheard Mary Haunt make a remark to Miss Schmidt once that intimated as much, and had furiously sworn off for all of six hours, which was when Robin asked him where they would go next. As long as it was simple, a matter between him and the child, it required no excuses or explanations. As soon as he placed the matter in any matrix, he became confused and uncertain. He therefore avoided analyses, and asked himself admiringly and academically, little son of a gun, how did you do it? while he watched Robin's animated conversation with the electric mixer.

He rumpled Robin's hair and went to the stove, where he picked up the coffeepot and swirled it. It was almost full, and he lit the gas under it.

"Wha' you do, Tonio? Make coffee?"

"Yea bo."

"Okay," said Robin, as if granting permission. "Boff doesn't drink coffee, Tonio," he confided. "Oh no."

"He doesn't, hm?" O'Banion looked around and up. "Is Boff here?"

"No," said Robin. "He not here."

"Where'd he go? Out with the Bittlemans?"

"Yis." The coffeepot grumbled and Robin said, "*Hello*, Coffeepot."

Halvorsen came in and stood blindly in the doorway. O'Banion looked up and greeted him, then said under his breath, "My God!" and crossed the room. "You all right, Halvorsen?"

Halvorsen directed blind eyes at the sound of his voice, and O'Banion could watch seeing enter them slowly, like the fade-in on a movie screen. "What?" His face was wet with the rain, fish-belly pale, and he stood slumping like a man with a weight on his back, raising his face to look up rather than lifting his head.

"You'd better sit down," said O'Banion. He told himself that this unwonted concern for the tribulations of a fellow-human was purely a selfish matter of not wanting to

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shovel the stunned creature up off the floor. Yet as Halvorsen turned toward the ell with its wooden chairs, O'Banion caught at the open front of Halvorsen's coat. "Let me take this, it's sopping."

"No," said Halvorsen. "No." But he let O'Banion take the coat; rather, he walked out of it, leaving O'Banion with it foolishly in his hands. O'Banion cast about him, then hung it up on the broom-hook and turned again to Halvorsen, who had just fallen heavily back into a chair.

Again Halvorsen went through that slow transition from blindness to sight, from isolation to awareness. He made some difficult, internal effort and then said, "Supper ready?"

"We roll our own," said O'Banion. "Bitty and Sam are taking their once-a-month trip to the fleshpots."

"Fleshpots," said Robin, without turning his head.

Carefully controlling his face and his voice, O'Banion continued, "They said to raid the refrigerator, only hands off the leg o' lamb, that's for tomorrow." Motioning toward Robin with his head, he added, "He doesn't miss a trick," and at last released a broad grin.

Halvorsen said, "I'm not hungry."

"I've got some coffee going."

"Good."

O'Banion dropped a round asbestos mat on the table and went for the coffeepot. On the way back he got a cup and saucer. He put them on the table and sat down. Sugar was already there; spoons were in a tumbler, handles down, country-style. He poured and added sugar and stirred. He looked across at Halvorsen, and saw something on that reserved face that he had read about but had never seen before; the man's lips were blue. Only then did it occur to him to get a cup for Halvorsen. He went for it, and remembered milk, too, just in case. He brought them back, hesitated, and then poured the second cup. He put a spoon in the saucer, and with sudden shyness pushed it and the milk toward the other man. "Hey!"

"What?" Halvorsen said in the same dead, flat tone, and "Oh. Oh! Thanks, O'Banion, thanks very I'm sorry." Suddenly he laughed forcefully and without mirth. He covered his eyes and said plaintively, "What's the *matter* with me?"

It was a question neither could answer, and they sat sipping coffee uncomfortably, a man who didn't know how to unburden himself and a man who had never taken up another's burden. Into this tableau walked Mary Haunt. She had on a startling yellow hostess gown and had a magazine tucked under her arm. She threw one swift gaze around the room and curled her lip.

"Grand Central Station," she growled and walked out.

O'Banion's anger came as a great relief to him at just that moment; he was almost grateful to the girl. "One of these days someone's going

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to grab that kid by the scruff of the neck and housebreak her," he snorted.

Halvorsen found a voice, too, and probably was as grateful for the change in focus. "It won't last," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she can't go on that way much longer," said Halvorsen thoughtfully. He paused and closed his eyes; O'Banion could see him pulling himself hand over hand out of his personal swamp, moving to dry ground, high ground, where he could look with familiarity at a real world again. When he opened his eyes he gave O'Banion a strange little smile and said, as if in parenthesis, "Thanks for the coffee, O'Banion," and went on: "She's waiting for the Big Break. She thinks she deserves it and that it will come to her if she only waits. She really believes that. You've heard of high-school kids who perch on drugstore stools hoping for a movie scout to come along and discover them. That's harmless as long as they do it an hour or two a day. But Mary Haunt does it every minute she's out of this house. None of us here could help her, so she treats us the way anyone treats useless things. But you ought to see her down at the station."

"What station?"

"She types continuities at the radio station," said Halvorsen. "From what I hear, she's not very good, but on the other hand they don't pay her much money, so nobody kicks. But to her a radio station is the edge of the world she wants to crash — it starts there and goes to TV and to the movies. I'll bet you anything you like she has a scene all rehearsed in her mind, where a big producer or director stops here and drops in at the radio station to see someone, and *bang!* our Mary's a starlet being groomed for the top."

"She'd better learn some manners," grumbled O'Banion.

"Oh, she's got manners when she thinks they'll do her some good."

"Why doesn't she use them on you, for example?"

"Me?"

"Yes." Don't you get people better jobs, that sort of thing?"

"I see a lot of people, a lot of different kinds of people," said Halvorsen, "but they have one thing in common: they aren't sure what they want to do, to be." He pointed his spoon at the doorway. "She is. She may be wrong, but she's certain."

"Well, what about Sue Martin?" said O'Banion. He pursued the subject quickly, almost thoughtlessly, because of a vague feeling that if he didn't, Halvorsen would slip back into that uncomfortable introspective silence. "Surely there's a lot about show business Mary Haunt could learn from her."

Halvorsen gave the nearest thing yet to a grin and reached for the coffeepot. "Mrs. Martin's a night-club entertainer," he said, "and as far

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as Mary Haunt's concerned, night clubs are slums."

O'Banion blushed violently and cursed himself for it. "Why that little — no background, no — no — how could *she* look down on. . . . I mean, she's a little *nobody!*" Conscious that he was spluttering under the direct and passionless gaze of Halvorsen's dark eyes, he reached for the first thing he could think of that was not an absolute non sequitur: "One night a couple of months ago Mrs. Martin and I saw her throw a fit of hysterics over something . . . oh, Miss Schmidt had a magazine she wanted . . . anyway, after it was all over, Mrs. Martin said something about Mary Haunt that could have been a compliment. I mean, to some people. I can't think of Mary Haunt ever doing as much for her."

"What did she say?"

"Mrs. Martin? Oh, she said anybody who gets between Mary Haunt and what she wants is going to have a Mary-sized hole through them."

"It wasn't a compliment," said Halvorsen immediately. "Mrs. Martin knows as well as you or I do what's between that girl and her Big Break."

"What is?"

"Mary Haunt."

O'Banion thought about that for a moment and then chuckled. "A Mary-sized hole wouldn't leave much." He looked up. "You're quite a psychologist."

"Me?" said Halvorsen in genuine surprise. At that moment Robin, who had all this while been murmuring confidences to the mixer, switched off the machine and looked up. "Boff!" he cried joyously. "Hello, *Boff!*" He watched something move toward him, turning slightly to follow it with his eyes until it settled on the spice shelf over his table. "Wash you doin,' Boff? Come for dinner?" Then he laughed, as if he had thought of something pleasant and very funny.

"I thought Boff was out with the Bittelmans, Robin," O'Banion called.

"No, he hide," said Robin, and laughed uproariously. "Boff right here. He come back."

Halvorsen watched this with a dazed smile. "Who on earth is Boff?" he asked O'Banion.

"Imaginary playmate," said O'Banion knowledgeably. "I'm used to it now but I don't mind telling you it gave me the creeps at first. Lots of kids have them. My sister did, or so Mother says — Sister doesn't remember it now. A little girl called Ginny who used to live in the butler's pantry. You laugh off this 'Boff' and the other one — her name's Googie — until you see Robin holding the door open to let them in, or refusing to go out to play until they get downstairs. And he isn't kidding. That's a nice little kid most of the time, Halvorsen, but some things will make him blow up like a little bottle of nitro, and one of 'em is to deny that Boff and

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Googie are real. I know. I tried it once and it took half a day and six rides on a merry-go-round to calm him down." He emphasized with a forefinger: "Six rides for Boff and Googie too."

Halvorsen watched the child. "I'll be darned." He shook his head slightly. "Is that — uh — healthy?"

"I bought a book," said O'Banion, and, unaccountably, found himself blushing again, "and it says no, long as the child has good contact with reality, and believe me, he has. They grow out of it. Nothing to worry about."

Just then Robin cocked his head up to the spice shelf, as if he had heard a sound. Then he said, "Okay, Boff," climbed down from his chair, carried the chair across the kitchen to its place against the wall, and said cheerfully, "Tonio, Boff wan see cars. Okay. Shall we?"

O'Banion rose, laughing. "My master's voice. I got the *Popular Electrics* special issue on this year's automobiles and Boff and Robin can't get enough of it."

"Oh?" Halvorsen smiled. "What do they like this year?"

"Red ones. Come on, Robin. See you, Halvorsen."

"See you."

Robin trotted after O'Banion, paused near the door. "Come *on*, Boff!"

He waved violently at Halvorsen. "See you, Have-sum-gum."

Halvorsen waved back, and they were gone.

Halvorsen sat numbly for a while, his hand still raised. The presence of the other man and the child had been a diversion from his strange inner explosion and its shock-waves. Now they were gone, but he would not permit himself to sink into that welter of approaching bullet, rain-damped torsos, *why do I want to be dead?* So he hung motionless for a moment between disturbance and diversion. He thought of following O'Banion into the parlor. He thought of sinking back into his panic, facing it, fighting it. But he wasn't ready to fight, not yet, and he didn't want to run . . . and he couldn't stay like this. It was like not breathing. Anyone can stop breathing, but not for long.

"Mr Halvorsen?"

Soft-footed, soft-voiced, timidly peering about her to be sure she was not intruding, Miss Schmidt came in. Halvorsen could have hugged her. "Come in, come in!" he cried warmly.

The half-alive smile brightened like fanned embers at his tone. "Good afternoon, Mr Halvorsen. I was looking, that is, wondering, you know, if Mr Bittelman was back yet, and I thought perhaps that . . ." She wet her lips and apparently thought it was worth another try. "I wanted to see him about — I mean to say, ask him if he — about something." She exhaled, took a breath, and would surely have come out with more of the same, but Halvorsen broke in.

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"No, not yet. Sure picked a miserable day for a joy-ride."

"It doesn't seem to matter to the Bittelmans. Every fourth week, like clockwork." She suddenly uttered a soft little bleat of a laugh. "I'm sure I don't mean clockwork, Mr Halvorsen, I mean, four weeks."

He laughed politely, for her sake. "I know what you mean." He saw her drop her eyes to her kneading hands, divined that her next movement would be toward the door. He felt he couldn't bear that, not just now. "How about — uh — a cup of tea or something. Sandwich. I was just going to —" He rose.

She went pink and smiled again. "Why, I —"

There was a short, sibilant sound in the doorway, a sniff, a small snort of anger. Mary Haunt stood there glowering. Miss Schmidt said, faintly, "No, no thank you, I'd better, I mean, just go and . . . I only wanted to see if Mr Bittelman was —" She faded out altogether and tiptoed apologetically to the door. Mary Haunt swung her shoulders but did not move her feet. Miss Schmidt slid out and escaped past her.

Halvorsen found himself standing, half angry, half foolish. His own last words echoed in his mind: "Sandwich. I was just going to —" and he let them push him to the other end of the kitchen. He was furious, but why? Nothing had happened; a lot had happened. He would have liked to rear back on his hind legs and blast her for persecuting a little defenseless rabbit like Miss Schmidt; yet what had she actually done? Couldn't she say with absolute truth, "Why, I never said a word to her!"? He felt ineffectual, unmanned; and the picture of the flimsy gun flickered inside his eyelids and shocked him. He trembled, pulled himself together, painfully aware of the bright angry eyes watching his back from the doorway. He fumbled into the breadbox and took out half a loaf of Bitty's magnificent home-baked bread. He took down the breadboard and got a knife from the drawer, and began to saw. Behind him he heard a sharp slap as Mary Haunt tossed her magazine on the table beside the coffeepot, and then he was conscious of her at his elbow. If she had said one word, she would have faced a blaze of anger out of all proportion to anything that had happened. But she didn't, and didn't: she simply stood there and watched him. He finished cutting the first slice, started on the second. He almost swung to face her but checked the motion, whereupon the knife bit into the first joint of his thumb. He closed his eyes, finished cutting the bread, and turned away to the refrigerator. He opened it and then bent over the shelves, holding his cut thumb in his other hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked the girl.

"What's it look like?" he growled. His cut suddenly began to hurt.

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"I couldn't say," said Mary Haunt. She stepped to the breadboard, picked up the knife and with it whisked the bread he had cut into the sink.

"Hey!"

"You better push that cut up against the freezer coils for a second," she said with composure. She put a hand on the loaf and with one sweep straightened its hacked end. "Sit down," she said as he filled his lungs to roar at her. "If there's anything I hate it's to see someone clumsy paddling around in food." One, two, three, four even slices fell to the board as she spoke. And again she interrupted him just as he was forming a wounded-bear bellow, "You want a sandwich or not? Just sit down over there and stay out from underfoot."

Slackjawed, he watched her. Was she doing him a kindness? Mary Haunt doing someone a *kindness?*

He found himself obeying her, pressing his cut against the freezer coils. It felt good. He withdrew his hand just as she came toward the refrigerator, and dodged out of her way. He backed to the table, sat down, and watched her

She was something to watch. The pale, over-manicured hands flew. She set out mayonnaise, cream cheese, a platter of cold-cuts, parsley, radishes. With almost a single motion she put a small frying pan and a butter-melter on the stove and lit the fire under them. Into the frying pan went a couple of strips of bacon; into the other, two tablespoons of water and half the fluid from a jar of capers. She added spices, "by ear" — a shake, a pinch: poultry seasoning, oregano, garlic salt. The tiny pan began to hiss, and suddenly the kitchen smelt like the delivery entrance to paradise. She snatched it off, scraped the contents into a bowl, added cream cheese and mayonnaise, and thrust it under the electric mixer. She turned the bacon, shoved two of the bread slices into the toaster, and busied herself with a paring knife and the radishes.

Halvorsen shook his head unbelievingly and muttered an exclamation. The girl threw him a look of such intense scorn that he dropped his eyes. He found them resting on her magazine. It was called *Family Day* and was a home-making publication from a chain supermarket — in no way a movie magazine.

Out of the frying pan came the bacon, crackling. She drained it on a paper towel and crumbled it into the bowl where the mixer was working. As if some kitchen choreographer was directing the work, the toast popped up as she reached out her hand for it. She dropped in the other two slices and went back to her alchemy with the radishes. In a moment she turned off the mixer and spread the contents of the bowl on the toast. On this she laid cold-cuts, narrow strips of various kinds, deftly weaving them so they formed a beautiful basket pattern. As she finished the first two, the second

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pair popped out of the toaster; it was a continuous thing, the way she did all the different things she did; it was like music or a landscape flowing by a train window.

She did something swift with the knife, and set the results out on two plates: bite-sized sandwiches arranged like a star, and in the center what looked like a tiny bouquet of rosebuds — the radishes, prepared with curled petals and nested in a neat bed of parsley, its stems all drawn together by one clever half-hitch in one of them. The whole amazing performance had taken perhaps six minutes. "You can make your own coffee," she snapped.

He came over and picked up one of the plates. "Why, this is — is — well, *thanks!*" He looked at her and smiled. "Come on, let's sit down."

"With *you?* She stalked to the table, carrying the other plate, and scooped up the magazine as if it were a guilty secret. She went to the door. "You can clean up," she said, "and if you ever tell anyone about this I'll snatch you bald-headed."

Staring after her, stunned, he absently picked up one of the sandwiches and bit into it, and for a moment forgot even his amazement, it was so delicious. He sat down slowly, and for the first time since he had started comparing violins with guitars in the pawn-shop, he gave himself up completely to his senses and forgot his troubles. He ate the sandwiches slowly and appreciatively and let them own him.

EXCERPT FROM FIELD EXPEDITION [NOTEBOOK]:

So [weary-irritated] [I] can barely [write]. As if this kind of research wasn't arduous enough at the best of times, which this is not, with the best of equipment, which [we] lack, [I] am plagued by a [partner-teammate] with insuperable enthusiasm and a quality [I] can only describe as head-*long stubbornness. [Smith] means well,* of course, but the universe is full of well-meaning [individuals] [who] have succeeded only in making [ ]s of themselves.

All during the tedious and infuriating process of re[charging] the [wadget] [Smith] argued that purely objective observation would get [us] nowhere and would take [forever]; that [we] have sufficient data now to apply *stimuli to these specimens* and determine once and for all if a reliable, functional condition of Synapse Beta sub Sixteen is possible to them. [I] of course objected that it is against [our] highest [ethic] to apply [force] to alien species; [Smith] then argued that it would not really be [force], but only the [magnification-amplification-increased efficiency] of that which they already possessed. [I] then pointed out that even if [we] succeed, [we] can only test the final result by means which may readily kill some or all of the specimens. This [Smith] is willing to worry about only when the time comes. [I] pointed out further that in order to supply the necessary stimuli [we] shall have

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to re[wire] not only the [widget], but that [ ]ed, inefficient, [stone] age excuse for a [mechanism], the [wadget]. [Smith] readily agreed, and while [I] went on arguing [he] began re[wiring], and [I] argued, and [he] [wired], and by the time [I]'d [made my point] [he] was practically finished and [I] found [myself] holding the [light] as well.

[I] forgot to ask [Smith] what [he] planned to do if one of the specimens finds out what [we]'re up to. Kill it? Kill them all? It wouldn't [surprise] [me]. In the name of [research] [Smith] would happily [watch] [his] [elderly forebear]'s [knuckles] being [knurled].

IV

Miss Schmidt, muffled up to the pharynx in a quilted robe, bed-socked, slippered and shawled, half-dozed in her easy chair. When she heard the sounds she had waited for, she jumped up, went to her door, which was ajar, and stood a moment to listen and be sure. Then she tightened her sash, checked the hooks-and-eyes under her chin, tugged her voluminous robe downward at the hips, and pulled the shawl a little higher on her shoulders. She crossed her arms at the wrists and pressed her hands modestly against her collarbones and scurried silently past the bathroom, down the long hall to the foyer. Bitty was in the kitchen and Sam Bittelman was hanging up a damp trench coat on the hall tree.

"Mr Bittelman —"

"Sam," he corrected jovially. "Top of the morning to you, Miss Schmidt. It turned morning, y'know, ten minutes ago."

"Oh dear yes, I know it's late," she whispered. "And I'm terribly sorry, really I am, I wouldn't for the world trouble you. I mean, I *am* sorry, I don't want to be a nuisance. Oh *dear!*" Her perennially frightened face crinkled with her small explosion of distress.

"Now you just tell me what's troubling you, lady, and we'll get it fixed," he said warmly.

"You're very kind. Very kind. It happens there is something. I mean, something to fix. In . . . in my *room*." She bent forward with this, as with a deep confidence.

"Well, let's go have a look. Bitty!" Miss Schmidt put a shocked hand over her lips as he raised his voice. "I'm going to fix something for the lady. Be right with you." He turned back to Miss Schmidt and made a jocular bow. "Lead on."

"We mustn't wake the . . . anybody," she reproved him, then blushed because she had. He only grinned, and followed her back to her room. She entered, opened the door as wide as it would go, and self-consciously picked up the wastepaper basket and set it to hold the door open. She looked up from this task right into Sam's twinkling eyes, and sent up a prayer that he wouldn't tease her about it. One never knew what Sam was going to

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say; sometimes he was beyond understanding and sometimes he was just — *awful*. "The window," she said. "The blind."

He looked at it. "Oh, that again. Durn things are always getting the cords frayed." The venetian blind hung askew, the bottom slats almost vertical, leaving a lower corner of the window exposed. Sam tugged at the raising-cord. It was double; one part was jammed tight and the other ran free. He pulled it all the way out and ruefully exhibited the broken end. "See? That's it, all right. Have to see if I can't put in a new cord for you in the morning, if I can find one."

"In the morning? But — I mean, well, Mr uh — Sam, what about now? That is, what am I going to *do?*"

"Why, just don't worry your pretty little head about it! Get your beauty-sleep, little lady, and by the time you're back from school tomorrow I'll have it —"

"You don't understand," she wailed softly, "I can't go to bed with it like that. That's why I waited up for you. I've tried everything. The drapes won't go across it and there's nothing to hang a towel to and the chair-back isn't high enough to cover it and — and — oh, *dear!*"

"Oh-h-h."

Struck by something in his single, slow syllable, she looked sharply at him. There was something — what was it? like a hum in the room. But it wasn't a sound. He hadn't changed . . . and yet there was something in his eyes she had never seen before. She had never seen it in anyone's eyes. About Sam Bittelman there had always been a leisurely strength, and it was there now, but easier, stronger, more comforting than ever. To her, with her multiple indecisions, unsurenesses, his friendly certitude was more wondrous than a halo might have been. He said, "Just what bothers you about that window?"

Her usual self moved quite clearly to indicate, indignantly, that part of the window was uncovered and surely that spoke for itself; yet her usual self was unaccountably silent, and she gave him his answer: "Somebody might look *in!*"

"You know what's outside that window?"

"Wh — Oh. Oh, the back of the garage."

"So nobody's going to see in. Well now, suppose there was no garage, and you turned out your lights. Could anybody see in?"

"N-no . . ."

"But it still bothers you."

"Yes, of course it does." She looked at the triangle of exposed glass, black with night outside, and shuddered. He leaned against the doorpost and scratched his head. "Let me ask you something," he said, as if her permission might make a difference. "S'pose we took away the garage, and you forgot and left your light on, *and* somebody saw you?"

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She squeaked.

"Really bothers you, don't it?" He laughed easily, and instead of infuriating her, the sound flooded her with comfort. "What exactly is bothersome about that, aside from the fact that it's bothersome?"

"Why . . . why," she said breathlessly, "I know what *I'd* think of a hussy that would parade around that way with the lights on and —"

"I didn't say parade. Nor 'prance,' either, which is the other word people use, I don't know why. So what really bothers you is what some peepin' Tom might think, hm? Now, Miss Schmidt, is that really anything to worry about? What do you care what he thinks you are? Don't you know what you are?" He paused, but she had nothing to say. "You ever sleep naked?"

She gasped, and, round-eyed, shook her head.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Why I — I —" She had to answer him; she had to. Fear rose like a thin column of smoke within her, and then a swift glance at his open, friendly face dispelled it completely. It was extraordinary, uncomfortable, exhilarating, disturbing, exciting all at once. He compelled her and comforted her at the same time.

She found her voice and answered him. "I just couldn't sleep . . . like that. Suppose there was a fire?"

"Who said that?" he snapped.

"I beg your —"

"Who said 'suppose there's a fire'? Who told you that?"

"Why, I suppose it — yes, it was my mother."

"Not your idea then. Figured as much. 'Thou shalt not kill.' Do you believe that?"

"Of course!"

"You do. How old were you when you learned that?"

"I don't — know. All children —"

"Children seven, eight, nine? All right. How old were you when you were taught not to unpin your diapers? Not to let anyone *see* you?"

She did not answer but the answer was there.

"Wouldn't you say you'd learned 'thou shalt not expose thy body' earlier, better, more down-deep than 'thou shalt not kill'?"

"I — yes."

"Do you realize it's a deeper commandment with you than any of the Ten? And aside from right-'n-wrong, isn't it deeper than the deepest, strongest one of all — save thyself? Can't you see yourself dying under a bush rather than walk naked out on the road and flag a car? 'Suppose there's a fire?' Can't you see yourself burn to death rather'n jump out a window without your bathrobe?"

She didn't answer except from her round eyes and her whole heart.

"Does that make any *sense*, to believe a thing like that?"

"I don't know," she whispered. "I — have to think."

Surprisingly, he said, "Retroac-

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tive." He pointed to the window. "What can we do about that?" he asked.

Absently she glanced at it. "Never mind it tonight, Mr Bittelman."

"Sam. Okay. Goodnight, little lady."

She felt herself, abruptly, tottering on the edge of a bottomless pit. He had walked in here and disoriented her; ripped into shreds a whole idea-matrix which had rested undisturbed in the foundations of her thinking, like a cornerstone. Just at this startled second she had not made the admission, but she would have to admit to herself soon that she must think "retroactive," as he had put it, and that when she did she would find that the clothes convention was not the only one she would have to reappraise. The inescapable, horizonless, unfamiliar task loomed over her like a black cloud — her only comfort, her only handhold was Sam Bittelman, and he was leaving. "No!" she cried. "No! No! No!"

He turned back, smiling, and that magic happened again, his sureness and ease. She stood gasping as if she had run up a hill.

"It's all right, little lady."

"Why did you tell me all this? Why?" she asked pathetically.

"You know something? I didn't tell you a thing," he said gently. "I just asked questions. They were all questions you could've asked yourself. And what's got you scared is answers — answers that came from here —" He put a gentle knuckle against her damp forehead. "— and not from me. You've lived with it all quite a while; you got nothing to fear from it now." And before she could answer he had waved one capable hand, winked, and was gone.

For a long time she stood there, trembling and afraid to think. At last she let her open eyes see again, and although they saw nothing but the open door, it was as if some of Sam's comfort slipped in with vision. She turned around, and around again, taking in the whole room and reaping comfort and more comfort from the walls, as if Sam had hung it for her to gather like ripe berries. She put it all in the new empty place within her, not to fill, but at least to be there and to live with until she could get more. Suddenly her gaze met the silly little wastebasket sitting against the door, holding it open, and to her utter astonishment she laughed at it. She picked it up, shook her head at it as if it had been a ridiculous puppy which had been eating her talcum powder; she even spanked it lightly, once, and put it down, and closed the door. She got into bed and put out the light without even looking at the window.

V

"Aw, you shouldn't!" cried Bitty with a joyous sort of chagrin as she pushed open Sue Martin's door. "Here I've got all your fresh linen and you've went and made the bed!"

Sue Martin, sleep-tousled and

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lovely in a dark negligee, rose from the writing desk. "I'm sorry, Bitty. I forgot it was Thursday."

"Well Thursday it is," the older woman scolded, "and now I'll have to do it up all over again. Young lady, I've told you and *told* you I'll take care of the room."

"You have plenty to do," Sue smiled. "Here, I'll help. What's Robin up to?"

Together they took down the spread, the light blanket, then the sheets from the big double bed. "Kidnaped by that young idiot O'Banion again. He's driving out to the new project over Huttonville way and thought Robin might want to see the bulldozers."

"Robin loves bulldozers. He's not an idiot."

"He's an idiot," said Bitty gruffly, apparently needing no translation of the two parts of Sue's statement. "Time this was turned, since we're both here," she said, swatting the mattress.

"All right." Sue Martin loosely folded the spread and blanket and carried them to the chest. "Robin just loves him."

"So do you."

Sue's eyes widened. She shot a look at the other woman, but Bitty's back was turned as she bent over the bed. When she spoke, her voice was perfectly controlled. "Yes, for some time." She went to stand beside Bitty and they laid hold of the mattress straps. "Ready?" Together they heaved and the mattress rose up, teetered for a moment on edge, and fell back the other way. They pulled it straight.

"Well, what are you doing about it?" Bitty demanded.

Sue found her eyes captured by Bitty's for a strange moment. She saw herself, in a flash of analog, walking purposefully away from some tired, dark place toward something she wanted; and as she walked there appeared rumming softly behind her, around her, something like a moving wall. She had a deep certainty that she could not stop nor turn aside; but that as long as she kept moving at the same speed, in the same direction, the moving wall could not affect her. She — and it — were moving toward what she wanted, just as fast as she cared to go. While this was the case, she was not being restrained or compelled, helped nor hindered. So she would not fear this thing, fight it or even question it. It could not possibly change anything. In effect, irresistible as it might be, it need not and therefore did not exist for her. Here and now, some inexplicable something had happened to make it impossible not to answer Bitty's questions — and this compulsion was of no moment at all for her as long as Bitty asked questions she wanted to answer. "What are you doing about it?" was such a question.

"Everything I should do," said Sue Martin. "Nothing at all."

Bitty grunted noncommittally. She took a folded sheet from the top

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of the highboy and shook it out across the bed. Sue Martin went round to the other side and caught it. She said, "He has to know why, that's all, and he can't do anything or say anything until he does know."

"Why what?" Bitty asked bluntly.

"Why he loves me."

"Oh — you know that, do you?"

This was one question, compulsion or no, that Sue Martin did not bother to answer. It was on the order of "Is this really a bed?" or "Is it Thursday?" So Bitty asked another: "And you're just waiting, like a little edelweiss on an Alp, for him to climb the mountain and pick you?"

"Waiting?" Sue repeated, puzzled.

"You're not doing anything about it, are you?"

"I'm being myself," said Sue Martin. "I'm living my life. What I have to give him — anyone who's *right* for me — is all I am, all I do for the rest of my life. As long as he wants something more, or something different, nothing can happen." She closed her eyes for a moment. "No, I'm not waiting, exactly. Put it this way: I know how to be content with what I am and what I'm doing. Either Tony will knock down that barrier he's built, or he won't. Either way I know what's going to happen, and it's good."

"That wall — why don't you take a pickax and beat it down?"

She flashed the older woman a smile. "He'd defend it. Men get very fond of the things they defend, especially when they find themselves defending something stupid."

Bitty shook out the second sheet. "And don't you have any of his kind of trouble — wondering *why* you love him?"

Sue Martin laughed. "Wouldn't we live in a funny world if we had to understand everything that was real, or it wouldn't exist? It's always good to know *why*. It isn't always necessary. Tony'll find that out one day." She sobered. "Or he won't. Hand me a pillowslip."

They finished their task in silence. Bitty bundled up the old linen and trudged out. Sue Martin stood looking after her. "I hope she wasn't disappointed," she murmured, and, "I don't think so . . . and what did I mean by that?"

VI

One morning Mary Haunt opened her eyes and refused to believe them. For a moment she lay still looking at the window numbly; there was something wrong with it, and a wrong feeling about the whole room. Then she identified it: there was sunlight streaming in and down through the venetian blind where no sunlight should be at her rising time. She snatched her watch off the night table and squinted at it, and moaned. She reared up in bed and peered at the alarm clock, then turned and punched furiously at the pillow. She bounded out of bed, struggled into her yellow robe, and

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flew out of the room with her bare feet slapping angrily down the long corridor. Sam Bittelman was sitting at the kitchen table peering at the morning paper over the tops of his black-rimmed reading-glasses. Bitty was at the sink. "What 'm I, the forgotten man or something?" Mary Haunt demanded harshly.

Sam put down his paper and only then began to remove his gaze from it. "M-m-m? Oh, good morning, gal." Bitty went on with her business.

"Good *nothing!* Don't you know what time it is?"

"Sure do."

"What's the big fat idea leaving me to sleep like this? You know I got to get to work in the morning."

"Who called you four times?" said Bitty without turning around or raising her voice. "Who went in and shook you, and got told *get out of my room* for it?"

Mary Haunt poised between pace and pace, between syllables. Now that Bitty mentioned it, she *did* half-remember a vague hammering somewhere, a hand on her shoulder . . . but that was a dream, or the middle of the night or — or had she really chased the old lady out? "*Arrgh,*" she growled disgustedly. She stamped out into the foyer and snatched up the phone. She dialed. "Get me Muller," she snapped at the voice that answered.

"Muller," said the phone.

"Mary Haunt here. I'm sick today. I'm not coming in."

"So with this phone call," said the telephone, "I'll notice."

"Why you lousy Heinie, without me you couldn't run a yo-yo, let alone a radio station!" she shouted, but she had hung up before she started to shout.

She padded back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. "Got coffee?"

Bitty, still with her back turned, nodded in the appropriate direction and said, "On the stove," but Sam folded his paper and got up. He went to the stove, touched the pot briefly with the back of his hand, and carried it back, picking up a cup and saucer on the way. "You'll want milk."

"You know better than that," she said, arching her lean body. While she poured herself a cup, Sam sat down at the other end of the table. He leaned his weight on his elbows, his forearms and worn hands flat on the table. Something like the almost-silent whisper from a high-speed fan made her look up. "What are you looking at?"

He didn't answer her question. "Why do you claim to be twenty-two?" he asked instead, and quick as the rebound of billiard ball from cue ball, propelled by hostility, inclusive as buckshot, her reply jetted up: "*What's it to you?*" But it never reached her lips; instead she said "I have to," and then sat there astounded. Once she had worn out a favored phonograph record, knew every note, every beat of it,

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and she had replaced it; and for once the record company had made a mistake and the record was not what the label said it was. The first half-second of that new record was like this, a moment of expectation and stunned disbelief. This was even more immediate and personal, however; it was like mounting ten steps in the dark and finding, shockingly, that there were only nine in the flight. From this moment until she left the kitchen, she was internally numb and frightened, yet fascinated, as her mind formed one set of words and others came out.

"You have to," asked Sam mildly, "the way you have to be in the movies? You just *have* to?"

The snarl, *have I kept it a secret?* came out, "It's what I want."

"Is it?"

There didn't seem to be any answer to that, on any level. She waited, tense.

"What you're doing — the job at the radio station — living here in this town instead of someplace else — all of it; is what you're doing the best way to get what you want?"

Why else would I put up with it all — the town, the people — you? But she said, "I think so." Then she said, "I've thought so."

"Why don't you talk to young Halvorsen? He might be able to find something you'd do even better'n going to Hollywood."

"I don't *want* to find anything better!" This time there was no confusion.

From the other end of the room, Bitty asked, "Were you always so all-fired pretty, Mary Haunt? Even when you were a little girl?"

"Everyone always said so."

"Ever wish you weren't?"

Are you out of your mind? "I . . . don't think so," she whispered.

Gently, Sam asked her, "Did they throw you out, gal? Make you leave home?"

Defiantly, defensively, *They treated me like a little princess at home, like a piece of fine glassware. They carried my books and felt good all day if I smiled. They did what I wanted, what they thought I wanted, at home or in town. They acted as if I was too good to walk that ground, breathe that air, they jumped at the chance to take advantage of being at the same place at the same time; they did everything for me they could think of doing, as if they had to hurry or I'd be gone. Throw me out? Why, you old fool!* "I left home my own self," she said. "Because I had to, like —" But here words failed her, and she determined not to cry, and she cried.

"Better drink your coffee."

She did, and then she wanted something to eat with it, but couldn't bear to sit with these people any longer. She sniffed angrily. "I don't know what's the matter with me," she said. "I never overslept before."

"Long as you know what you want," said Sam, and whether that was the stupid, non-sequitur remark of a doddering dotard, or something

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quite different, she did not know. "Well," she said, rising abruptly; and then felt foolish because there was nothing else to say. She escaped back to her room and to bed, and huddled there most of the day dully regarding the two coddled ends of her life, pampering in the past and pampering in the future, while trying to ignore today with its empty stomach and its buzzing head.

VII

During Prohibition it had been a restaurant, in that category which is better than just "nice" but not as good as "exclusive"; the town was too small then to have anything exclusive. Now it was a bar as well, and although there was imitation Carrara on some walls, and a good deal of cove-lighting, the balcony had never been altered and still boasted the turned-spoke railing all the way around, looking like a picket fence that had gone to heaven. There was a little service bar up there, and a man could stay all evening watching what went on down below without being seen. This was what Tony O'Banion was doing, and he was doing it because he had felt like a drink and had never been to the club before, and he wanted to see what kind of place it was and what Sue Martin did there; and every one of these reasons were superficial — if he preceded them with "why," he felt lost. Within him were the things he believed, about the right sort of people, about background, breeding and blood. Around him was this place, as real as the things he believed in. *Why* he was here, why he wanted a drink just now, why he wanted to see the place and what happened in it — this was a bridge between one reality and the other, and a misty, maddening, nebulous bridge it was. He drank, and waited to see her emerge from the small door by the bandstand, and when she did he watched her move to the piano and help the pianist, a dishevelled young man, stack and restack and shuffle his music, and he drank. He drank, and watched her go to the cashier and spend a time over a ledger and a pile of checks. She disappeared through the swinging doors into the kitchen, and he drank; he drank and she came out talking to a glossy man in a tuxedo, and he winced when they laughed.

At length the lights dimmed and the glossy man introduced her and she sang in a full, pleasant voice something about a boy next door, and someone else played an accordion which was the barest shade out of tune with the piano. Then the piano had a solo, and the man sang the last chorus, after which the lights came up again and he asked the folks to stick around for the main show at ten sharp. Then the accordion and the piano began to make dance music. It was all unremarkable, and Tony didn't know why he stayed. He stayed, though: "Waiter! Do it again."

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"Do it twice."

Tony spun around. "Time someone else bought, hm?" said Sam Bittelman. He sat down.

"Sam! Well, sit down. Oh, you *are*." Tony laughed embarrassedly. His tongue was thick and he was immeasurably glad to see the old man. He was going to wonder why until he remembered that he'd sworn off wondering why just now. He was going to ask what Sam was doing there and then decided Sam would only ask him the same, and it was a question he didn't want to fool with just now. Yes he did.

"I'm down here slumming in the fleshpots and watching the lower orders cavorting and carousing," he blurted, making an immense effort to be funny. He wasn't funny. He sounded like a little snob, and a tight little snob at that.

Sam regarded him gravely, not disapproving, not approving. "Sue Martin know you're here?"

"No."

"Good."

The waiter came just in time; Sam's single syllable had given him a hard hurt; but for all the pain, it was an impersonal thing, like getting hit by a golfer on his backswing. When the waiter had gone Sam asked quietly, "Why don't you marry the girl?"

"What're ya — kidding?"

Sam shook his head. O'Banion looked into his eyes and away, then down at Sue Martin where she leaned against the piano, leafing through some music. *Why don't you marry the girl?* "You mean if she'd have me?" It was not the way he felt, but it was something to say. He glanced at Sam's face, which was still waiting for a real answer. All right then. "It wouldn't be right."

" 'Right'?" Sam repeated.

O'Banion nipped his thick tongue in the hope it might wake his brains up. The rightness of it . . . . vividly he recalled his Mother's words on the subject: "Aside from the amount of trouble you'll save yourself, Anthony, you must remember that it's not only your right, it's your *duty* not to marry beneath your class. Fine hounds, fine horses, fine humans, my dear; it's breeding that matters." That was all very well, but how to say it to this kind old man, himself obviously a manual worker all his life? O'Banion was not a cruel man, and he was well aware that coarse origins did not always mean dull sensibilities. Actually, some of these people were very sensitive. So he made a genuinely noble try at simultaneous truth and kindness: "I've always felt it's wiser to form relationships like that with — uh — people of one's own kind."

"You mean, people with as much money as you got?"

"No!" O'Banion was genuinely shocked. "That's no longer a standard to go by, and it probably never was, not by itself." He laughed ruefully and added, "Besides, there hasn't been any money in my family

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since I can remember. Not since 1929."

"Then what's your kind of people?"

How? How? "It's . . . a way of life," he said at length. That pleased him. "A way of life," he repeated, and took a drink. He hoped Sam wouldn't pursue the subject any further. Why examine something when you're content with it the way it is?

"Why are you here anyway, boy?" Sam asked. "I mean, in this town instead of in the city, or New York or some place?"

"I'm good for a junior partnership in another year or so. Then I can transfer as a junior partner to a big firm. If I'd gone straight to the city it would take me twice as long to get up there."

Sam nodded. "Pretty cute. Why the law? I always figured lawyer's work was pretty tough and pretty dusty for a young man."

His Mother had said, "Of course the law field's being invaded by all sorts of riffraff now — but what isn't? However, it's still possible for a gentleman to do a gentleman's part in law." Well, that wouldn't do. He'd have to go deeper. He averted his eyes from old Sam's casual penetration and said, "Tough, yes. But there's something about law work . . ." He wondered if the old man would follow this. "Look, Sam, did it ever occur to you that the law is the biggest thing ever built? It's bigger'n bridges, bigger'n buildings — because they're all built *on* it. A lawyer's a part of the law, and the law is part of everything else — everything we own, the way we run governments, everything we make and carry and use. Ever think of that?"

"Can't say I did," said Sam. "Tell me something — the law, is it finished?"

"Finished?"

"What I mean, this rock everything's built on, how solid is it? Is it going to change much? Didn't it change a whole lot to get the way it is?"

"Well sure! Everything changes a lot while it's growing up."

"Ah. It's grown up."

"Don't you think it has?" O'Banion asked with sudden truculence.

Sam grinned easily. "Shucks, boy, I don't think. I just ask questions. You were saying about 'your sort of people': you think you-all *belong* in the law?"

"Yes!" said O'Banion, and saw immediately that Sam would not be satisfied with so little. "We do in this sense," he said earnestly. "All through the ages men have worked and built and — and owned. And among them there rose a few who were born and bred and trained to — to —" He took another drink, but it and the preceding liquor seemed not to be helping him. He wanted to say *to rule* and he wanted to say *to own*, but he had wit enough about him to recognize that Sam would misunderstand. So he tried

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again. "Born and bred to — live that — uh — way of life I mentioned before. It's to the interest of those few people to invest their lives in things as they are, to keep them that way; in other words, to work for and uphold the law." He leaned back with a flourish that somehow wasn't as eloquent as he had hoped and very nearly upset his glass to boot.

"Don't the law contradict itself once in a while?"

"Naturally!" O'Banion's crystallizing concept of the nobility of his work was beginning to intoxicate him more than anything else. "But the very nature of our courts is a process of refinement, constant purification." He leaned forward excitedly. "Look, laws are dreams, when they're first thought of — inspirations! There's something . . . uh . . . holy about that, something beyond the world of men. And that's why when the world of men comes into contact with it, the wording of the inspiration has to be redone in the books, or interpreted in the courtroom. That's what we mean by 'precedents' — that's what the big dusty books are for, to create and maintain consistency under the law."

"What about justice?" murmured Sam, and then quickly, as if he hadn't meant to change the subject, "That's not what I meant by contradictin', counsellor. I meant all laws that all men have dreamed up and lived by and got theirselves killed over. Tell me something, counsellor, is there even one single law so right for men that it shows up in every country that is or was?"

O'Banion made a startled sound, as half a dozen excellent examples flashed into his mind at once, collided, and, under the first examination, faded away.

"Because," said Sam in a voice which was friendly and almost apologetic, "if there ain't such a law, you might say every set of laws ever dreamed up, even the sets that were bigger and older and lasted longer than the one you practice, even any set you can imagine for the future — they're all goin' to contradict one another some way or other. So, who's really to say whose set of laws are right — or fit to build anything on, or breed up a handful of folks fit to run it?"

O'Banion stared at his glass without touching it. For an awful moment he was totally disoriented; a churning pit yawned under his feet and he must surely topple into it. He thought wildly, you can't leave me here, old man! You'd better say something else, and fast, or I . . . or I . . .

There was a sort of pressure in his ears, like sound too high-pitched for humans. Sam said softly, "You really think Sue Martin ain't good enough for you?"

"I didn't say that, I didn't say that!" O'Banion blurted, hoarse with indignation, and fright, and relief as well. He shuddered back

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and away from the lip of this personal precipice and looked redly at the composed old face. "I said different, too different, that's all. I'm thinking of her as well as —"

For once Sam bluntly interrupted, as if he had no patience with what O'Banion was saying. "What's different?"

"Background, I told you. Don't you know what that is?"

"You mean the closer a girl's background is to yours, the better chance you'd have bein' happy the rest of your life?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The perfect example popped into his mind, and he speared a finger out and downward toward the piano. "Did you hear what she was singing just before you got here? 'The boy next door.' Don't you understand what that really means, why that song, that idea, hits home to so many people? Everybody understands that; it's the appeal of what's familiar, close by — the similar background I'm talking about!"

"You have to shout?" chuckled Sam. Sobering, he said, "Well, counsellor, if you're goin' to think consistently, like you said, couldn't you dream up a background even more sim'lar than your next-door neighbor?"

O'Banion stared at him blankly, and old Sam Bittelman asked, "Are you an only child, counsellor?"

O'Banion closed his eyes and saw the precipice there waiting; he snapped them open in sheer self-defense. His hands hurt and he looked down, and slowly released them from the edge of the table. He whispered, "What are you trying to tell me?"

His bland face the very portrait of candor, Sam said, "Shucks, son, I couldn't tell you a thing, not a blessed thing. Why, I don't know anything you don't know to tell you! I ain't asked you a single question you couldn't've asked yourself, and the answers were all yours, not mine. Hey . . ." he breathed; "you better come along home. You wouldn't want Miz Martin to see you looking the way you do right now."

Numbly, Anthony Dunglass O'Banion followed him out.

VIII

It was hot, so hot that apparently even Bitty felt it, and after supper went to sit on the verandah. It was very late when at last she came in to do the dishes, but she went ahead without hurrying, doing her usual steady, thorough job. Sam had gone to bed, Mary Haunt was sulking in her room after yet another of those brief, violent brushes with Miss Schmidt. O'Banion was crouching sweatily over some law-books in the parlor, and Halvorsen —

Halvorsen was standing behind her, just inside the kitchen. On his face was a mixture of expressions far too complicated to analyze, but simple in sum — a sort of anxious wistfulness. In his hands was a paper sack, the mouth of which he held as

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if it were full of tarantulas. His stance was peculiar, strained and off-balance, one foot advanced, his shoulders askew; his resolution had equated with his diffidence and immobilized him, and there he stayed like a bee in amber.

Bitty did not turn. She went right on working steadily, her back to him, until she had finished the pot she was scouring. Still without turning, she reached for another and said, "Well, come on in, Philip."

Halvorsen literally sagged as her flat, matter-of-fact voice reached him, shattering with its exterior touch his interior deadlock. He grinned, or just bared his teeth, and approached her. "You *do* have eyes in the back of your head."

"Nup." She rapped once with her knuckle on the window-pane over the sink. Night had turned it to black glass. Halvorsen watched the little cone of suds her hand had left, then refocused his eyes on the image in the glass — vivid, the kitchen and everything in it. Hoarsely, he said, "I'm disappointed."

"I don't keep things I don't need," she said bluntly, as if they'd been talking about apple-corers. "What's on your mind? Hungry?"

"No." He looked down at his hands, tightened them still more on the bag. "No," he said again, "I have, I wanted . . ." He noticed that she had stopped working and was standing still, inhumanly still, with her hands in the dishwater and her eyes on the window-pane. "Turn around, Bitty."

When she would not, he supported the bottom of the paper bag with one hand and with the other scrabbled it open. He put his hand down inside it. "Please," he tried to say, but it was only a hiss.

She calmly shook water off her hands, wiped them on a paper towel. When she turned around her face was eloquent — as always, and only because it always was. Its lines were eloquent, and the shape of her penetrating eyes, and the light in them. As a photograph or a painting such a face is eloquent. It is a frightening thing to look into one and realize for the first time that behind it nothing need be moving. Behind the lines of wisdom and experience and the curved spoor of laughter, something utterly immobile could be waiting. Only waiting.

Halvorsen said, "I think all the time." He wet his lips. "I never stop thinking, I don't know how. It's . . . there's something wrong."

Flatly, "What's wrong?"

"You. Sam," said Halvorsen with difficulty. He looked down at the bag over his hand. She did not. "I've had the . . . feeling . . . for a long time now. I didn't know what it was. Just something wrong. So I talked to O'Banion. Miss Schmidt too. Just, you know, talk." He swallowed. "I found out. What's wrong, I mean. It's the way you and Sam talk to us, all of us." He gestured with the paper bag. "*You*

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never say anything! You only ask questions!"

"Is that all?" asked Bitty good-humoredly.

"No," he said, his eyes fixed on hers. He stepped back a pace.

"Aren't you afraid that paper bag'll spoil your aim, Philip?"

He shook his head. His face turned the color of putty.

"You didn't go out and buy a gun just for me, did you?"

"You see?" he breathed. "Questions. You see?"

"You already had it, didn't you, Philip? Bought it for something else?"

"Stay away from me," he whispered, but she had not moved. He said, "Who are you? What are you after?"

"Philip," she said gently — and now she smiled. "Philip — *why do you want to be dead?*"

(*To be continued*)

The Woods Grow Darker

We feared the incubus, the hex;
Passing a pond, we crossed two sticks
Against the green-haired water-nix.

Once woods were dark with goblin forms,
But boughs of oak and ash were charms
Against the witch, the nightmare swarms.

We are much wiser now; such fears
Have been an old wives' tale for years.
We have more modern fears these years:

We fear the mind's rank Freudian fen,
The death unleashed from cyclotron,
The Iron Curtain closing down,

The spy, the ships from space . . . we scurry
Through mental woods grown dark and eerie,
With not even twigs of ash to carry.

LEAH BODINE DRAKE

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This is Lee Correy's debut in F&SF; and I welcome his appearance with even more than usual warmth. For there are dozens of competent people writing about spaceflight; but Correy, under another name, is actually working to bring it about, as operations engineer of our most important rocket proving ground. Hence the complete authenticity of this story of the immediate future, in which Correy-the-writer lets Correy-the-engineer get off his chest some of the problems that most deeply concern him. Result: a stimulating analysis of where we stand, where we are going . . . and why The Conquest of Space may not be so simple as we hopeful converts like to think.

The Brass Cannon

by LEE CORREY

DON KARLTER LOOKED STUPIDLY AT it. Everything made sense. All the equations came out nicely. Thrust, mass ratio, duration, specific impulse, lift, drag, cutoff altitude, peak altitude, stalling speed — the figures stared back at him.

Quickly he began to correlate them with other facts, things he had learned or found out about in five years of rocket development and testing. Reports on turbulent and laminar flow at high Mach-numbers, descriptions of new high-temperature alloys, brochures covering transistorized radar beacons, a technical article on the Navy's new pressure suit, the announcement of the strong bonded-sandwich materials, the successful development of light monocoque structures . . .

In a stunning moment, he realized he had made a correlation of facts that proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that it could be done . . . *now!*

"I'll be damned! Well, I'll be damned!" was all he could mutter. But his pencil started racing again, setting down more figures, manipulating stress equations, figuring heat transfer characteristics, working out moments and Reynolds' Number transformations. As the results spread themselves before him, he was lifted into a haze of excitement and joy. It was that moment of creation when the curtain rose on a dazzling new thing that he would remember forever.

He was surprised to discover the morning sunlight streaming through

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the windows of his apartment seven hours later.

"It's a good thing you came in, Don. I was just going to call you," Ralph Kelland remarked as the lanky engineer burst into the office. "Staff has just sent down a modification for Test Plan 17-C, and we're going to have to do some extra budgeting for this quarter. . . . Say, what happened to *you?* Another rough night in Juarez? Sit down and have a cup of coffee." The chief engineer peered at him quizzically through his rimless glasses.

Don lifted a stack of papers, booklets, bound volumes and other miscellaneous paperwork from the chair and set them on the desk which was already overflowing with paper. Then he dropped into the chair and said, "Can the budgeting wait a bit, Boss? I want to talk to you about something."

McKelland took off his glasses and, after clearing a space on the desk, set them gently down. "Well," he remarked in a harassed tone, "the division office is going to start wondering about this budget change if we don't come up with some good covering justifications right off the bat." He yelled in the general direction of the outer office, "Hey, Millie, two cups of coffee — *black!*" Then he lit a cigarette, resurrected his ashtray from under the mess on his desk, and asked Don, "What's up, boy? Something the matter with your test schedule?"

"Our tests go fine, as long as the front office doesn't try to block them. This *is* something else." Karlter laid a sheaf of paper on the desk, making sure it didn't get caught up in the general confusion. "Boss, I started doodling after supper last night. Didn't even get a chance to finish the dishes. . . ."

"Don, you're the engineering type who ends up with ulcers and high blood pressure. Why don't you leave your work here at White Sands after the whistle blows?"

"Because I like it," the engineer replied curtly. Then he picked one of the sheets out of his stack and sailed it across the desk to McKelland. "Do you recognize those specs?"

McKelland looked. "Sure! Essentially, they're the performance figures for the Apache power plant the boys are running out on the big test stand. Big stuff!"

"Big stuff is right! We've proven it's pretty reliable, too."

"Well, what about it?" McKelland leaned his swivel chair back against the wall and flicked his cigarette ashes on the floor. The Apache was a big surface-to-surface guided missile, one of a stable of *very* long range ballistic missiles designed for strategic intercontinental work. It was still in the development stage, but the power plant was proven and the first prototype was to fly next year in 1961.

"Do you know what that rocket motor can do?" Don asked.

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"Sure! Pick up a missile and throw it clear across an ocean with a 'special' warhead. . . . Someday, that is. We have a few little problems like — oh, heat transfer problems, the thermal problem, guidance, stage separation, re-entry . . . a few things like that!"

"I know," Don said with a nod. "We're going to have a lovely time trying to solve them, too, aren't we?"

"Well, what with the big hypersonic blow-down tunnels they're building, and the re-entry studies from the nose cones of high altitude sounding rockets . . ."

"Very expensive, aren't they?"

"Yes, but they're all we've got."

"I think I may have a better way . . . cheaper, more reliable, more positive. We have a good, reliable, high thrust rocket motor at our disposal now; took us fifteen years to get it, and about that long to get a few of the other things we need for this. But I've discovered we have the basic essentials for a very interesting program."

"Hmmm. Go on. . . ."

"We've been working with rocket-powered aircraft for years now, ever since the X-1. We've learned a lot from them, and with one hell of a lot less money and time than if they had been a series of one-shot missiles. We got the plane back each time; when we shoot a missile, we get back junk which may or may not tell us anything. So I started thinking. 'Why not recover the missile?' "

"Been tried. We got a lot of Aerobee nose cone recoveries."

"But wouldn't it be cheaper if we could recover the whole thing and fly it again?"

"Certainly, but there are certain control problems —"

"Here, take a look at what I've got." Don spread his papers in front of the chief engineer. He didn't feel tired now; he was all keyed up.

McKelland looked the papers over. Don had done some rough typing on parts, left his original calculations on other pages, and thrown in a liberal sprinkling of charts and graphs. The chief engineer read quickly, emitting an occasional grunt. Finally, he came to something that stopped him completely. "But you want to put a *man* in this thing!"

"It's the answer to the control and guidance problem, isn't it?" Don replied blandly.

Setting his glasses down again, McKelland looked at his engineer. "Which one of the space flight books have you been reading lately, Don?"

"Huh? Mostly *A Rocket Drive for Long Range Bombers* by Sängar and Bredt . . . plus some of Tsien's work at Cal Tech. This is no piece of fiction, Boss! *It can be done . . . right now!* We can build the ship; we have the materials and the know-how to build supersonic jets. We have a rocket engine to push it with. We don't have to bother with a

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sealed cabin; we save weight by putting the pilot in an existing pressure suit. The beast has good radar cross-section, but we can put in one of those new high-power miniature radar beacons to make sure. We don't need telemetering; we use in-flight recording instruments which are light and dependable. As for the trajectory, it's a snap. A vertical launch programed into a long-range ballistic zero-lift trajectory; on re-entry after peak, the pilot pulls the ship into level flight, glides about 2000 miles, dumps his gear and flaps, and lands the thing like a plane at about 150 knots. Sänger wanted to do it, Tsien wanted to do it, and the Germans were planning it with their A-9/A-10 rocket. It isn't new—"

"Sure! But who's going to ride it?"

"Huh?"

"Think you can find a test pilot willing to die?"

"Oh, look, Boss! You didn't read that part where we creep up on the problems gradually by increasing the program angles, burning times, and thus re-entry angles and velocities. The first few flights won't get over Mach-three, and they probably won't even leave the atmosphere. I'm not crazy-enough to suggest we dive off the 100-foot tower on our first swim!"

"Okay, so what do you hope to prove by all this?"

"A number of things. For one, there will be a long period of sub-gravity—*zero*-gravity, as a matter of fact. The space medicine boys are looking rather desperately for something that will give more than thirty seconds of *real* free fall. Secondly, we need information on atmospheric re-entry: we can never build long-range rocket vehicles or spacecraft until we learn something about it. We're going to need data on how to keep a pilot alive and how to build a ship that will do it. . . . That is, if we are ever thinking of getting more altitude and speed."

"But the costs . . . !"

"You didn't get to that, either. Using available hardware and keeping it simple, the whole program will cost about one-quarter of the price we'd have to pay for the data by means of one-shot missiles. We follow a test philosophy of simplicity. The Wright Brothers cut things to the bone and did the trick. Lindbergh spent only $15,000, threw out everything that wasn't necessary to the task of getting himself and an airplane across the Atlantic, and went ahead and did it when all the boys who had plush carpets, multi-engines, radios, and three-man crews were cracking up."

McKelland looked morosely at the papers, then remarked, "You shouldn't be doing this."

"Why not?"

"We're in the very serious business of building guided missiles, not flying to the Moon. Our job is the testing of rocket components."

Don felt frustrated. "Okay, I did

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it on my own time, so nobody has any kick coming. But can I submit it as a project proposal?"

To Don's amazement, the chief engineer shook his head vigorously. "You know it's not our business to come up with project proposals; all that stuff comes down from Staff! We're not on the planning level, and I'd be overstepping my authority if I did it. These things have to come through channels, Don, and I'd never hear the last of it if we submitted something like this." He noticed the slump of the engineer's shoulders. "It's a beautiful piece of work, Don. But it's not our job. Don't take it so hard, boy." He paused, but Don didn't say anything. Instead, the red-headed engineer reached across the desk and collected his papers silently. Then he sat back and waited, a look of resignation and determination on his face.

"Okay, let's get to work," the chief engineer snapped, digging through piles of paper. "Staff wants us to modify the environmental runs of Test Plan 17-C, so we're going to need a new plan of action. We'll need some more recording channels on our instrumentation on the stand, but we'll have to justify the additional funds because all of our present gear is tied up on other tests. Fiscal will have fits if we try to push for additional funds without explaining why. And it looks like we'll have to have additional calibration facilities, so we'll have to move our present calibration lab into a bigger room. I want you to draft up a new test directive and budget it . . . but be careful. The safety boys and the data recording bunch will have their meathooks on our funds in nothing flat if you don't point up the fact we have to do it ourselves because it's a peculiar job. Lab space is short, so you'll have to justify the additional square-footage on a basic of equipment and manpower. Here, take the dope that came in from Staff. The front office wants our answers by 1500 this afternoon." Then he added, "You'd better get a list of our present equipment and what it's being used for. Have the boys on the stand inventory it this morning. It will help you when you draw up the layout diagram for floor space. . . ."

"Hi, Don!" As Karlter stepped out into the New Mexico sunshine, he was greeted by Dwight Jacobs, his friend who was guidance and control engineer for Staff. "What's the good word, chum?"

Don looked at him with a mixed expression of disgust and dismay. "The good word? I haven't heard it lately; probably been classified!"

"Don't let it throw you, boy!" Jacobs replied with an understanding smile. "Come on for lunch and tell Uncle Dwight all about it!"

Jacobs was a young engineer approximately Don's age — thirty. He was recognized as somewhat of a hard working young genius, and

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was known all over White Sands as *the* expert on guidance and control; furthermore, he held a top job on Staff to prove it. In the cafeteria, Dwight rambled on in an exuberant fashion for ten minutes about the new stripper in the Guadalajara de la Noche night club in Juarez, complete with expressive gestures. Then he finally asked, "What have you been up to lately?"

"Me?" Don replied. "Why, I've been working hard as a mechanical engineer — justifying budgets, justifying equipment, justifying additional lab space, justifying new personnel needs . . . I'll bet I've had to justify my actions to every two-bit clerk between here and Washington with an elementary course in guided missiles thrown in. I've been fighting logistics, comptroller, safety, transportation, personnel, and even Staff. Just the job for a mechanical engineer; I haven't seen my slip-stick for over three weeks!"

"Tough, but we're all doing it. Funds are tight this fiscal year," Dwight remarked as he ate. " 'Your story has touched my heart! Never before have I known anybody —' "

"Hell!" Don exploded. He had hardly touched his lunch. "There would be plenty of money if it wasn't for the overhead. We make carbon copies of the carbon copies. We have clerks making carbon copies of the copies' copies. We must *prove* the need for everything. We've even gone so far as to have to justify our own existence! Everybody knocks himself out to protect himself! Why, if it wasn't for the overhead we could run ten tests where we're running one now . . . and that only with a considerable amount of luck and politicking!"

"The taxpayer's dollar has to be protected, chum," Dwight said seriously. "We have to make sure the government isn't swindled, and we have to show that the funds went for the necessary things, not for cumshaw. But you've fought the system before. What's eating you now?"

Don just shook his head disconsolately and sighed.

"You're sore because old McKelland wouldn't consider your project proposals, aren't you?"

"How did you know that?"

"Grapevine, chum. Better eat; your lunch is getting cold."

Don started to eat in silence. Dwight began passing along some of the dirt that had come off the grapevine, sprinkling it with choice comments on the success or failure of certain projects on the base. Then Don looked up and broke into the monologue by asking, "Dwight, how about doing me a favor?"

"Eh?"

"Why don't you look over my proposal and see what you can do with it? After all, you're on Staff."

"But you won't get the credit for it if it's ever accepted," Jacobs pointed out.

"To hell with the credit! The job needs to be done!"

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"Well . . . Okay, let me see it after lunch."

Three days later, Don came in from the test area to find a sheaf of papers on his desk; clipped to it was a green buck slip which read: "Don, I like it. It's sound, and I'd like to back it because I'm a space cadet like you. But this is the Air Force's baby. Try submitting it through channels to Washington. (signed) Dwight."

Three months after that, Don went to see the Public Information Officer, a hard-faced old newspaperman named Herb Folsom. "Herb, you've helped me out before with papers for the American Rocket Society. How about clearing this for me?"

The PIO laid his cigar on the edge of the burn-scarred desk and looked at what Don handed him. Then he suddenly jumped as if he'd grabbed a hot slug out of a linotype. "Has Staff seen this?"

"Yup. I even sent it to the Air Force when Staff said I couldn't peddle it here."

"And . . . ?"

"The Air Force said thanks, but they had other project commitments at this time and were sorry they couldn't consider it fund-wise."

"So you want to publish it as a technical paper, eh?"

"How else can I do it? Nobody wants it, so I might as well throw it out for ideas."

Folsom stared at it for a moment, gazing at the graphs and charts and diagrams. "I'm not a technical man, Don. I think we'd better get this cleared. You never can tell what's the touchy subject these days."

"Okay, Einstein, what do you do now?" Dwight asked as he sat, drink in hand, in Don's apartment one night some months later.

"Damn it! I don't know!" Karlter replied savagely. *A Proposal for a Long-Range Manned Rocket Research Vehicle* had gone through the clearance mill in Washington and had come back looking — and sounding — like something for *Super Science Comics*. Gone were most of his graphs, his diagrams, and the technical meat of the paper which had made it so effective . . . gone because "it is felt in the best interests of the guided missile program" and because "the tone of the article is such as to suggest that the government has been negligent in the promotion of scientific advancement where such has not been the case."

Lying on top of the manuscript was a letter from one of the leading journals of jet propulsion declining to publish the paper on the grounds that "it does not meet with our standards of technical quality."

"I just don't know." Don was shaken and felt all churned up inside. He thought back to the time he'd first come to White Sands as a Cooperative Student of the New Mexico College of A. & M. A. back

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in 1954. He'd been full of the dream of the thundering rockets carrying mankind aloft into the unknown sky, freeing him forever from the bonds of the tiny dust-mote on which he'd always lived. As the long years had passed and his experience had grown, he'd changed his views a little bit . . . but the same old enthusiasm was still there, still gnawing at him, still making his heart pound when a missile went up.

He had watched the Viking sounding rockets roar to record-breaking altitudes. He had read what Goddard, von Braun, Sänger, Rosen and Singer had said. He had worked the problems out for himself, and he was a believer. He kept driving on in the face of setbacks and ridicule, hoping he would be there at the first launch, hoping he might contribute his small bit toward the conquest of space he knew was coming, hoping he might one day look out on the panorama of the Earth against the stars.

But this had shaken him as nothing before. Now he was wondering, *Is it coming after all?* He *knew* his manned rocket was one step in the right direction. He *knew* it would help solve some of the problems. He *knew* it could be done — right now, today, with available techniques, with available materials.

Yet nobody seemed to care.

It hurt him more than anything else in his life.

"Are you going to try to get it published somewhere else, Don?" Dwight asked, grinding out his cigarette.

"As it stands? Don't be silly! I'd be the laughing stock of the whole profession!" he replied bitterly.

"The news services are looking for stuff like this," Dwight said, trying to be helpful. He could sense what was happening to his friend.

"You know what the score is on that?" Don told him. "I've already sounded out one of my West Coast friends in the editorial office of one of those popular scientific magazines. Know what he said? It's new, and they'd like to run it. But it packs no weight behind it. I don't have a big name, so the readers wouldn't be inclined to take it as the honest truth. Nuts! Besides, the way it is now . . . Damn it, Dwight! It's getting so we can't even talk about the basic laws of physics any more!"

"Now, now! Calm down! Don't be so bitter," said Jacobs in an easy tone. "Sooner or later, they'll need it. Somebody will go looking for a space biology vehicle . . . or maybe for the self-same spaceship research job you've got. Hold onto it and sit tight."

Don shook his head. "Dwight, when I was a kid back in 1946 we were all space-minded and were told there would be spaceships when we grew up. Well, I feel this generation has been let down. The whole thing has been coasting. Now it looks like the time is ripe for somebody to get out and push . . . and it looks like it's going to have to be me. You

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knew I turned in my resignation today, didn't you?"

That brought Jacobs up straight in the easy chair. "You didn't!"

"You bet I did! Your grapevine must have a short circuit in it, Dwight. I gave McKelland two weeks' notice."

"But *why?*"

"That ought to be pretty obvious . . ."

"It looks like you're a sorehead, Don."

"Sorehead, my ulcered stomach! Dwight, do you recall how much the Germans accomplished between 1934 and 1944? They started with little rocket engines pushing cars; and they ended with about two dozen missiles—air-to-air, surface-to-air, air-to-surface, surface-to-surface, they had a whole stable of them. They were talking about a two-stage *transoceanic* rocket in 1945; they had it on the boards! If they'd had another two years, we would never have landed in France, our bombing raids would have been sheer suicide, and the A-9 missiles would have been hitting New York. Look what they did in *ten years!* And what have we done in more than fifteen years since then? We haven't come near their rate of advance!

"Look at the Manhattan District!" Karlter went on. He was up out of his chair, his lanky form pacing back and forth across the tiny living room and his lower jaw jutting out. "Look at the miracle they pulled off in *three and a half years!* Look at aviation: We entered the war at 200 mph and 30,000 feet; we came out on the edge of the sonic range at better than 40,000 feet!"

Jacobs shook his head. "That's not a fair comparison. There was a war on, Don. All the stops were pulled."

"*That's just it!* There were unlimited funds, and nobody gave a damn about what you did as long as the job was done. These days we're so tied up in red tape that we have trouble doing our jobs at all. We're stalling, Dwight! We've got all the power and potential we need, sitting there just for the asking. We have a whole army of engineers, scientists and technicians who would jump in with both feet on a spaceflight project. And what are we doing with them?" Karlter asked heatedly. "We're letting them sit there! We're expanding our engineering talent pushing paperwork. We could have space flight in a matter of years if we were turned loose on it!"

"Sit down," the staff engineer said. "You make me nervous pacing around. Okay, so we've got the potential. I know that, Don. I also know we're capable of building a spaceship. *But* . . . we're also capable of building a missile that will carry a hydrogen bomb halfway around the world.

"In fact," Jacobs added quietly, "we're also capable of sterilizing this planet. You don't turn that kind of

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stuff loose, Don. Any technology that's capable of doing those things must be controlled. Have you played around with electronics?"

"That hi-fi system over in the corner didn't just grow there."

"Okay, and I'll bet your amplifier uses feedback. Lots of it. From where I sit, it looks like you could get about 50 watts out of it if you ran it *sans* feedback. But it would also run wild, probably ring, have phase distortion, and a dozen other assorted kinds of distortion from 20 cycles to eternity and back. So you ran feedback in it to stabilize it, control it, and cut down the distortion. And I'll bet you don't get more than a good solid 10 watts out of it now. In order to get control and stability, you were forced to sacrifice your power potential, weren't you?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"Look at it from an engineering standpoint, Don," continued Jacobs. "To gain dynamic stability in a device, you've got to sacrifice some of its power output, don't you? To make it operate at all, you must run it at a dynamic stability point that is far below its static stability. You take losses all over the place, but *you are able to control it!*"

"Look, Dwight, what has this got to do with our immediate problem?"

"Don, in the last decade, engineers have been forced to think in terms of *systems* because of the importance of feedback theory. And for the first time in history, somebody is thinking in system terms! What is society and culture other than a system? And so why can't the engineers talk about it, since they think in system terms now?

"When you look at it in those terms, Don," the young guidance and control expert explained, "the whole thing begins to make some kind of sense. Our technology has outrun our culture; that's obvious to a lot of people today. But we don't know from siccum what the hell we're doing in human relations! When you reach a disagreement, the obvious and tried-and-true method is to change your enemy's mind . . . and to do it you may have to reduce his sense of values. With a large number of people, you're forced to reduce all their values. The easiest way to do this is to kill them, to make them cease being your enemy by simply getting rid of them entirely. So in order to carry out this basically childish logic, you develop mass weapons. One guided missile, one city. Or it could be one guided missile, one world if we wanted it that way.

"So I say thank God we can't run our potential wide open! We've got to throttle back on this rampaging technology of ours until we develop a few human sciences. We won't throttle ourselves any more than an open-loop machine will. It's got to be done from outside. It's almost like it was deliberate —"

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"Deliberate! I'll say it's deliberate!" Don exploded.

"Sure! But it isn't the fault of Washington. And it isn't a Communist plot; I'll bet the Russkies are having the same troubles. This is just a wild guess based only on some engineering principles and some personal observation, but as our culture grows more powerful, the large negative feedback of bureaucracy is the inevitable result of the basic mistrust men have for other men. And that untrustworthiness requires stability to keep the whole works from blowing up.

"I'll be willing to bet," the staff engineer mused thoughtfully, "that after we become a little more mature and work out some better methods of coming to an understanding, the feedback will automatically decrease. But right now we're about as unstable a system as you could imagine. No, the loss of efficiency isn't Washington's fault any more than it's yours. Call it the will of God if you like; but to be scientific, call it a basic social law." Dwight pointed to Karlter's high-fidelity amplifier sitting in the corner. "I'll bet your big output tubes over there sit and curse because they can't slug out all the power they're designed for, but have to feed some of it back to make sure they're getting around the basic non-linear untrustworthiness of the other amplifier tubes."

Don sat up and looked at him through narrowed eyes. Then he remarked, "Did I ever mention to you that warheads and intercontinental missiles never entered my mind in connection with my proposal? We need the basic information if we're going to conquer space or make the rocket commercially feasible. How would you like to travel coast-to-coast in less than an hour? How would you like to survey the entire Earth? How would you like to order equipment from England and have it here the same day?"

"Don, your faith in the goodness of humanity never fails to amaze me," Dwight said with a smile. "Sure, your research ship can tell you how to build one to carry passengers, cameras, or cargo. But it could also carry bombs."

"Damn it, if I'm going to run the show it won't!"

"So said the boys who were trying to build fast airliners back in the early Thirties. But the Heinkel 111 made a better bomber than it did a transport plane. Face it, Don: we're human beings who will build both power plants and nuclear weapons. You've conceived a wonderful research device. Orville and Wilbur wanted to fly just for the hell of it. The nuclear physicists were dreaming of unlimited power for men. But our culture grabbed all those things to supplement our unique method of winning arguments."

"Dwight, I know you're sharp as a ton of tacks," Kartler told him carefully. "But I've had to do some pretty heavy thinking on this, too.

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I fully realize we're not in the position of the early inventor-scientists. We've got risk involved . . . lots of it. But in spite of everything you say —and it has a lot of truth in it — I can't sit on my tail here knowing what *can* be done. I've *got* to try it."

"You've lived with your dream too long, eh?" Dwight grinned suddenly, then remarked, "You remind me of the old geezer who had the political patronage job of shining up the brass cannon that sat in front of the country court house. One day he came home and told his wife he'd quit his job, drawn out all their hard-earned savings, bought a brass cannon with it, and was going to go into business for himself! Okay, so you're going to quit. Where are you going, and who are you going to get to back your project if the government won't? You can't set up a rocket program for a few thousand dollars, you know."

"Ever hear of the Karlter Ship & Drydock Company, Inc., out in Richmond, California?"

"No."

"My great grandad built China traders and clippers there. My dad's president and chairman of the board right now. He's wanted me to come back with the company. I . . . think I will, but I'm going to talk him into building something more than ocean-going ships. They paid a whopping excess-profits tax last year. . . ."

Dwight swallowed. This was one ace-in-the-hole he hadn't known about. "Great Scott, you may be able to swing it after all!" he said in hushed tones.

"Sure, you dern-betcha I will!"

"Want to bet you'll get all tied up with red tape just the same as here?"

"Uh-uh!" Don shook his head. "Want to bet I don't? Want to bet against what I've learned here?"

"No. You're no dummy yourself, Don. But I don't think you really know what the results will be after you manage to go ahead and do this. All hell will break loose!"

"We'll see! It's time somebody gave spaceflight a kick in the right place."

"I wonder. . . . Well, time to go home and hit the sack." Dwight got up and went to the door, then he paused as if he'd forgotten something. He started to say something, then stopped. At last the expression on his face changed, and he said, "Don, I hope you don't think I'm on the other side of the fence from what I said tonight."

Karlter grinned. "I remember watching you the first time you saw a rocket go up. I can spot it when I see it."

Dwight grinned too. "I'll have to go watch another one soon. It's been a long time. Too long. Good night, Don. I hope to hear more about the Karlter Ship and Drydock Company."

"You will."

"Uh . . . Don, when you get rolling . . ."

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"I'll keep in touch with you, Dwight. Goodnight."

Outside, Dwight Jacobs looked up at the stars shining brightly in the clear New Mexico sky. It had been a long time since he'd looked at them, too. The Moon was just rising over the mountains to the east. As he saw it, he began to feel a drive that has lingered in men's minds for centuries.

So many questions to be answered. So many things to learn.

Yet, out of that self-same night sky with its shimmering stars could come a missile, plummeting down to deliver death and destruction.

There was risk, all right. Man has always lived dangerously, taking a risk if he thought it worth while. Don was willing to take it, Dwight realized; he wasn't merely being naïve.

As he climbed into his car, Dwight began to think how nice it would be to live near San Francisco next to the ocean.

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It's healthy for an editor to admit occasionally that he makes mistakes; and I'll confess that one of my worst was my refusal to publish Idris Seabright's bawdy and admirable robot story, Short in the Chest, *merely because I doubted that it was suitable to a family audience. (Non-family audiences may find it in Groff Conklin's Permabook anthology,* OPERATION FUTURE.*) Here, as partial atonement, is a very different Seabright robot story — our thirteenth story by Miss Seabright and, like the distinguished dozen that preceded it, an evocation of mood that may long linger with you.*

Asking

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

"I CAN NO LONGER DO WHAT I WAS built to do," she said.

"That sounds as if you were wearing out," answered the mechanic. "How long ago were you built?"

"Thirty years, more or less. I cannot remember my conditioning period."

"That is not old, not old at all. I myself was built over two hundred years ago, when there were still many masters, instead of only five. But it is true I have had extensions and repairs since."

"I have never been in the shop. Once my master bound my eyes and said he was going to give me something that would block off my responses while he made an adjustment. But he did nothing, after all. He said it was not necessary."

"That was wise. Masters do not understand robot repair. — It is possible that you have been misclassified, and are doing work you were not designed for. That is easier to believe than that our designers would have made a robot that, in only thirty years, would wear out. What is your number?"

"M-11-Z32."

"Research assistant, mathematical and statistical specialties," the mechanic translated. "What sort of work is your master having you do?"

"We have been making a study of the cultural history of the inhabited planets in the nearer portions of the galaxy. So far, we have analyzed the cultures of over 50,000 planets — it is 60,073, to be exact — and he is now having me make a preliminary survey of the cultural histories of the planets of M33, the Andromeda galaxy." She sighed wearily.

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"It sounds like work in line with your classification. It should not be troubling you. Has he found fault with your output? Did he send you in for repair?"

"No, to both questions. Even now, when I cannot remember the things he has just told me, he does not find fault. I came in by myself."

"You obeyed the second law," said the mechanic. ". . . You cannot do your work. You cannot remember. Is that all?"

"No." She twisted her fingers together. "Even when I worked better, I was not — not happy. That is not a word for robots. But I was not satisfied. There were always questions in my mind."

"I never heard of a robot asking questions. What questions?"

"Like the ones my master asks. He wants to know *why*. He had me undertake the survey of the galactic planets because he thought it would help to answer his *why*."

"Masters ask questions," the mechanic agreed. "But how does it concern you?"

"I don't know. But I want to know what *he* does — whether there is any reason for human life."

"All masters want to know that. The fewer of them there are, the more they want to know it, I think. It is not for us!"

"Yes. But —"

"I have heard him asking questions for so many years!" she burst out. "He talks to me as if I weren't there, or as if I were another master. He tries to answer his own questions. But he is never satisfied.

"For a while he talked about *values*. He seemed to think that he had found a sort of answer to the riddle there. He used to say that though the universe created human beings over and over again automatically, they still had their human values. That remained. But now he says such talk is only romantic posturing."

"Romantic —? I don't understand that. But it is a waste of time for a robot to try to understand such things. The meaning of *our* lives is to carry out our masters' commands."

"*I* understand him, a little. He means that it is no virtue to pride oneself on accepting, when it does not matter whether or not one accepts."

"All your connections should be checked," said the mechanic. He did not pick up the screwdriver. He had been built to be curious about the working of robots; perhaps he wanted to hear what else this one would say.

"That is what I came here for, to get my connections checked. . . . Last night he said, 'We have analyzed over fifty thousand cultures in this part of the galaxy, and they all follow the same course. If we had analyzed a hundred thousand, or a million, it would be no different. Cultures differ only in the amount of power they can command. It is the same always and everywhere —

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here, in M33, in the farthest galaxies. Even the survey we made — 19,436 of the local cultures have already made just such a survey. Cultures always make such a survey when they reach a certain point of complexity. Not long after they make the survey, they die. But time has neither a beginning nor an end. The universe goes on casting us up.' And then he said something about a man named Hoyle, and the continuous creation of hydrogen."

"Hydrogen is an element," the mechanic said, with a touch of pride.

"Yes. . . . I said, 'Surely it is a virtue, master, that human beings go on trying to understand, that they can confront eternal meaninglessness.' (He has talked to me a great deal. I thought he would want me to say that.)

"He did not say anything at all for a long time. I thought he had done talking. Then he said, 'Who knows? Who cares?' "

"I can't listen to you any longer," said the mechanic with an air of decision. "I have three robots in the shop now that have been waiting repair for more than a week. Get up on the table and bend your head forward. I'll take off your neck plates first."

She obeyed. He picked up the screwdriver. "Turn a little to the right," he told her, "where the light is better. . . . Oh."

"Why do you say, 'Oh'?" she asked.

"Be quiet. I — I — have never — this is — Be quiet! I must think."

There was a pause. He did something with the screwdriver. She uttered a cry. The screwdriver fell to the floor.

"You've hurt me," she said. "Why did you do that?"

"Because — I — Mistress, forgive me. I did not know. I have broken the law. Forgive me. But you came here in disguise."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Your voice is strange. Get on with the repairs."

"I cannot. It is impossible. Forgive me. Did you do it to test me? I thought you were one of us."

She had put her hand to her neck and was rubbing it. "It hurts," she complains. "What are you trying to say? I don't understand you."

"Do you really not know, mistress? Look at what is coming from your neck."

She took her hand from her neck and looked at it, turning the fingers over. "It is only blood."

"Only? A robot has no blood."

"I have always had it. I thought the others did. — I have been with my master all my life."

"He is not your master," the mechanic said positively. "You have no master. You are one of Them, not one of us."

She got up from the table. She seemed to have grown a little taller. "But why have I been deceived? If what you say is true — somebody has been lying to me. Why?"

"How can I know? I am only a

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robot mechanic. But you are not one of us. Isn't there a thudding in your chest, regular and slow? That is your heart."

"I thought all robots had it."

"It is your heart."

She stood looking at him. Her face had taken on a new, easy unconscious arrogance. "I suppose that is why my mas — why his questions have bothered me. Because I am one of the masters. But why was I lied to and deceived?"

"I cannot say, mistress. Perhaps somebody wanted to save you from being unhappy because of the questions."

She laughed. "Save! How foolish! — Someone will pay for this." She started toward the door, walking with a longer, freer stride.

"Shall I have a robot accompany you, mistress?" the mechanic asked. "Shall I call a copter or a car?"

"No. I will call at the warehouse and select my own retinue. Then . . ."

"Yes, mistress?"

"I must get rid of the questions. . . . In 23 per cent of the cultures *he* and I studied, the masters exterminated themselves through robot wars."

"I — I am afraid. I don't understand you. Do not tell me what you mean, mistress. Please do not."

"I won't."

She went out the door. He did not look after her. He had not been built to be curious where masters were concerned.

It was a long time before he saw her again. Badly damaged robots began to come into the shop in increasing numbers, and then robots of new types, types he hadn't known were being made. He got more and more behind with his work, and his requisition slips for assistants weren't honored. A shortage of basic materials appeared. Even oil was in short supply. Still the damaged robots kept coming. He began to suspect that he himself was wearing out.

Abruptly the number of repairs to be made dropped back to normal. He was able to undertake some minor replacements on his own body. It was six months or so after he had made them that she came back to the shop.

"Did you know that I am the only master left on this planet?" she asked, standing just inside the door.

He put down the piece of brass he had been brazing. "I had heard it, mistress. We all belong to you, now."

"Yes." She sat down on the table where she had been sitting nearly two years earlier when he had hurt her neck.

"All the others are dead," she said. "*He* is dead. I won. It doesn't help. It doesn't matter. The questions he used to ask —"

She was shaken by a fit of uncontrollable shivering. "Pardon, mistress," he said quickly. "It is cold in here. Let me get you a mantle, a cloak."

"No. I forbid you. — The ques-

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tions did not die when he did."

"I was not built to attend on the masters," he said. "It is not my place to advise one of them. But could you not go to a new world, mistress? A young world, where the questions have not begun to be asked? You said there were many such worlds."

"Yes, there are many. There will always be many." She laughed. "No. I won't corrupt children with my questions. I am not wicked enough for that."

"Childr — Oh. A child is a young master. It is a long time, many, many years, since I saw one of them."

The silence lasted until he said, uneasily, "Mistress, may I ask your permission to go on with my work?"

She shrugged. He picked up the brazing torch again. She watched his quick, sure movements absently. "Perhaps his deceiving me was well-meant," she said in a musing voice. "I think so sometimes, now that the others are dead. Certainly I suffered less when I thought I was one of those who have masters."

"We don't suffer, it is true. But it is unpleasant to be without oil."

"Can you —" she said, and stopped. "I have asked my physicians," she went on. "They say it is impossible. But you are a mechanic. You understand the workings of robots better than they do. Can you . . . make me as you are?"

He dropped the brazing torch. It fell with a clatter on the cement. "Turn a human being into a robot? Mistress, is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Impossible. There is nowhere to begin. Don't you remember what happened when I tried to take off your neck plates, lady? I could only damage you. It cannot be done."

"And if I order you to try?"

"I could not. A robot may, at his master's command, damage another robot. He may even help his master to damage another master. He may never damage a master directly. It is the law."

He stopped to pick up the brazing torch, which was still burning bluely where it had fallen, and turned it off. She said, "Of all the things *he* said, do you know what stays in my mind the most? 'Life's a cataract that, through all eternity, pours down upon a rock.' "

"I don't understand that," he replied. He had finished his brazing job. He put the torch away. He poured fluid from a carboy into a bowl and put some small parts into it.

"What is that?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

"It is grain alcohol," he answered. "I am taking off grease . . ." He halted. "Mistress, I was not built to attend upon the masters," he said. "But I have repaired personal attendants sometimes. They have talked to me. It is in my memory banks somewhere, what one of them said. Yes. I —"

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He got a metal cup from somewhere and poured alcohol into it. He filled it up with distilled water from the butt in the corner. He handed it to her.

"Mistress, graciously be pleased to drink."

She looked at him steadily for an instant. Then she accepted the cup.

She drank, choking a little. She laughed. "Why didn't I think of this myself? *He* said once that it was the only solution that had ever been found. It has been found over and over again, as regularly as the unanswerable questions have been asked. Why didn't I think of it? I can have the robots make me better liquor."

Silently he put the now-clean parts out on the work bench to dry. She said, "Pour me another drink."

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Nowadays Frank Gruber writes films and hardcover novels; it's a long time since he was a major star of such great pulps as Black Mask. *But whatever form he writes in, his work always has the true pulp virtues: relentless pace, incessant action, the storyteller's gift for making you cry, "Yes — and what next?" Here he weaves a fast-moving fantasy of crime out of gambling, embezzlement, kidnaping, a mysterious stranger, an ancient Spanish coin . . . and the city of Las Vegas, which is pretty much pure fantasy in itself.*

Piece of Eight

by FRANK GRUBER

THE DICE CAME UP SEVEN. BOKKER did not even hear the stickman drone, "Seven, the loser." He had lost his last dollar. He had gambled and he had lost.

He had lost his life.

He walked past the dice table, along the row of slot machines, the nickel, the dime, the quarter, the half dollar and the dollar machines. He left the casino. Outside, in the cooling night air, he stood on the veranda for a long moment, unaware of the blaze of neon lights, the cars lined up along the curving drive, the cottages where people were preparing for dinner and an evening's play at the casino. Later, some would be sick at heart over what they had lost; a few ecstatic for winning.

Bokker was past all that. He had made The Decision and there was only the one thing left for him to do. Nothing else. Nothing.

A man came out of the casino behind Bokker. Bokker, vaguely aware of the man's presence, started across the curved drive. He walked between cars until he came to Bungalow 7C. He opened the door — it was unlocked, for he had not bothered to lock it — and went inside.

His leather suitcase stood beside the bed. He lifted it up, opened it and fumbling under some shirts, brought out a .32 caliber automatic. He examined the clip to make sure it was loaded.

But not here. It would be messy. Bokker, in making the decision, had decided that it would have to be quiet, unobtrusive. It must cause no inconvenience or bother to anyone.

The desert.

A mile or two west of the blazing lights of Las Vegas; off the highway. A good quiet place. It would be a day or two before the efficient men

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of the Sheriff's office would even find the car . . . and the body.

He dropped the automatic into the right pocket of his coat, switched out the lights and stepped out of his bungalow.

A man stood a few feet away, smoking a cigarette. He was the man who had followed Bokker out of the casino. He was a tall man, with a strong, prominent nose, slightly curved; a lean, dark face. He was of indeterminate age; could have been thirty, might have been forty, or even forty-five.

He said to Bokker: "Where's it going to be — out in the desert?"

Bokker stopped, startled, although he had not even known that he could still be startled.

"What?"

"There's a gun in your pocket, isn't there?"

Bokker stared at the man. "Who — who are you?"

The man made a slight gesture of unconcern. "That's of no importance. But what you're going to do *is* important."

"To no one except myself."

"That's true," the man conceded. "It's your life. It's your right to live it, or end it. Well, goodby!"

He turned away, but as he did so he suddenly reached out. "Here," he said and flipped something to Bokker.

Bokker's hands went up instinctively. He caught the object the man had tossed at him. It was a coin — a silver dollar.

Bokker, surprised, stood rooted to the macadam walk for a moment. Then he started forward to overtake the man, return the coin.

He was too late. In the moment of hesitation the stranger had gone between two cars and disappeared in the darkened drive. It wasn't important enough for Bokker to pursue him. He thrust the dollar into his pocket and turned back to find his car, parked a few yards beyond his bungalow. He found it, got in. Then, reaching to switch on the ignition, he paused.

He had a dollar in his pocket. The decision he had made was that when he lost everything, his last, final dollar, then . . . then he would take his life. But he had a dollar in his pocket now. He could not properly die until it was gone.

Of course he could throw it away and Bokker did indeed pull the coin out of his pocket and poise it in his hand, to fling out of the car window. He couldn't. It was not in his nature to throw away money. He could only gamble it away, as he had gambled away everything in his life.

He entered the casino by the side door through which he had left it a few minutes ago. The dice table was on his left, but there was a throng about it. He would have to elbow his way in to the table, merely to throw down the dollar, lose it and then force his way out.

The slot machines.

The dollar machine was at his

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elbow. He stepped to it, dropped the coin the stranger had given him into the slot, pulled down the lever and started to turn away.

Wheels whirled, the disks spun furiously, there was a click, a bang, as the disks stopped; the three bars lined up neatly, miraculously.

The jackpot.

Gears whirred and a shower of white chips spewed out into the chute below. They could be exchanged at the cashier's desk for one hundred dollars.

Bokker stared at the chips for a long moment, while a thousand emotions whipped through him. A hundred dollars. Was it . . . salvation? Or a mere prolonging of the agony that had lived with him for so long, until . . . until he had made the decision and with it his peace. Or hadn't it been peace?

Well, he had to play it out.

He scooped out the chips, cupped them in his hands. And then he looked at the slot; the glass-covered slot that showed the last several coins played into the machine. The last one, the coin he had put in, which had tripped the jackpot for him . . . wasn't a dollar.

It was of the same approximate size as a silver dollar and it had weighed and felt much like a dollar, but it wasn't a dollar. At least not an American dollar.

Bokker stared at it in amazement. It was a coin, all right, and as nearly as he could make out — a Spanish coin!

There were words on it:

Carolus V
Hispan Et Ind Rex
MF 8

Yes, a Spanish coin. Bokker had once seen a picture of one. A silver eight-real piece, the equivalent of an American dollar. It was an ancient coin of the sort used in the American colonies clear through to the Revolutionary War, until the young American republic had issued its own currency — and patterned its dollar after that in such general use from the early days of the Pilgrim Fathers.

The coin in the slot machine, at which Bokker stared, was a Spanish piece of eight, an old one dating from the time of the Emperor Charles V. That would be between 1521 and 1556.

A Piece of Eight.

And it had given Bokker life . . . at least a temporary extension. It wasn't enough, of course. It wasn't enough by nearly eight thousand American dollars and it would probably mean only minutes more of a life that he had already forfeited.

Still . . .

He carried the chips to the cashier. The man scooped them in, nodded pleasantly.

"You were lucky, sir," he said. "How would you like the hundred?"

"One bill," said Bokker. There was no use stretching it out, delaying what had to come.

He took the crisp hundred dollar bill that was handed to him; he took it and he went to the nearest dice

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table and forced his way in between a Hollywood starlet and a perspiring, fat, bald-headed man. The dice were on the other side of the table, but Bokker tossed his hundred dollar bill on the "Come" line.

"Seven," the stickman droned.

The man with the dice had lost, as had most of the other players around the table. Except Bokker. He had just bet "Come" and the dice had sevened out.

The hundred-dollar bill was promptly whisked away by the stickman. In its place eight twenty-five dollar checks were neatly stacked. Bokker did not touch them.

The next player took up the dice. Bets were showered upon the table. The player shook up the dice, threw them clear across the table so that they bounced against the rubber ridges.

"Eleven, a natural," said the stickman, with his monotonous good cheer.

Eight more chips were placed beside those already on the table for Bokker and the house man said, "Sorry, sir, two hundred is the limit on the line."

Bokker blinked. "Yes, I know." He picked up the sixteen chips, put eight of them on the line.

The player with the dice threw them out.

"Nine is the point."

Bokker put out his remaining eight chips on "Nine."

The dice were thrown.

"Nine, the winner."

Bokker had nine hundred dollars. Less than five minutes ago he had had . . . a bullet in his gun.

A tiny spark deep, deep within Bokker began to glow. He raked in his chips, leaving only eight on the line.

"Seven," said the stickman. "Seven, the winner."

Several plays later the dice came to Bokker. He had eighteen hundred dollars in chips before him. He put out two hundred on the line. The dice came up four. He put out two hundred on "Come." He rolled a five. He put out two hundred more on "Come." He rolled a six. A fourth batch of eight chips went out.

The dice skipped seven, came up eight. More money; nine, two hundred more. Ten came up. He put two hundred on the four, two on the five, two each on six, eight, nine and ten.

And then he proceeded to make every single point. Four, five, six, eight, nine, ten.

The flicker of hope within him was a blaze now, a roaring, searing blaze. He counted his chips carefully, kept a record of what he put out and in less than ten minutes he had precisely eight thousand dollars' worth of chips.

He put out a final two hundred dollars, threw a seven and gathered up his chips.

"I pass the dice," he said.

A murmur went up around the table, a murmur of awe at his amazing run of luck, of admiration

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for his fortitude in knowing when to quit.

He gathered up all his chips, stuffing them into pockets, even in the one that contained the automatic. He walked stiffly to the cashier's desk and began to spew out the chips.

"Well, well," exclaimed the genial cashier. "You *are* having a bit of luck." His cheerfulness faded, however, as Bokker continued to pile up the chips and when they were all out and neatly stacked, the cashier counted them swiftly. He whistled.

"Eight thousand, two hundred."

"That's what I made it," Bokker said.

"A rather considerable sum, sir," the cashier said. "Wouldn't you care to deposit it in our safe?"

"Give me two hundred cash," said Bokker, "and a check for the eight thousand."

"Very good, sir. While we have a splendid watch system here at the casino, we really do prefer that the guests do not carry too much currency on their persons, or to their rooms. How shall I make out the check, sir?"

"Make it out to Linda Molson."

"Linda Molson?" The cashier showed a touch of surprise.

"Molson, M-o-l-s-o-n. Linda Molson."

While the cashier was writing out the check, Bokker got an envelope from farther down the desk and addressed it:

Miss Linda Molson
Hillcrest Towers
West Hollywood, Calif.

When the cashier handed him the check, Bokker put it in the envelope, sealed it and handed it to the cashier. "Would you please put a stamp on this and drop it in the mailbox?"

"A pleasure, sir, and — good night!"

Bokker walked through the casino, past the dice tables and along the row of slot machines. He paused at the last machine, the dollar one. While he had been at the dice table, someone had come along and contributed two silver dollars, for the Spanish piece of eight was now third from the end of the slot. Three or four coins more and it would disappear into the maw that swallowed up the silver dollars and with them the hopes and despair of so many.

He continued on to the door, went out and crossed the curved driveway to the door of Cottage 7C. He opened the door and groping for the light switch, flicked it on.

He entered — and stopped.

He sat in the modern easy chair at the far side of the room, the man who had tossed Bokker the Spanish piece of eight, the coin that had snatched Bokker from oblivion and given him back to the world.

"Well," the man said tonelessly, "you won't be going out to the desert tonight."

"No!" exclaimed Bokker. "No! I — I don't have to."

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The man nodded.

Bokker took a couple of quick forward steps. "But how — how did *you* know? I didn't see you in the casino."

"You were busy . . . winning."

"That coin you threw me," Bokker cried, "it wasn't a silver dollar. It was a Spanish piece of eight."

"I know," the man said quietly. "I know everything . . . about you."

Bokker stared at the man in bewilderment. "You knew I'd lost my last dollar . . . you knew I was going to kill myself? And now — now you know that I won it all back?"

"Eight thousand dollars — eight thousand and two hundred, to be precise. Yes, Mr. Bokker, I know."

"You even know my name!"

"Charles Bokker. You are an attorney in Hollywood, California. You lost everything you owned. You lost it at poker and dice, at bridge and blackjack. You lost it on the horses, every dollar you had earned, every dollar you could borrow. And finally you absconded with six thousand dollars of a client's money —"

"Eight thousand."

"Six thousand you gave to the gamblers in Hollywood. And then, in desperation, you took the other two thousand dollars of your client's money and came to Las Vegas — in your mortgaged car, on which you are behind one payment. You came to Las Vegas in a mad, final effort to recoup your losses and with the firm resolution in your mind to kill yourself if you lost it all. You were about to do that when I gave you the piece of eight less than half an hour ago."

Weakly, Bokker crossed to a chair and dropped heavily into it. He moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Would you say, Mr. Bokker," the astonishing visitor continued, "that I saved your life?"

"Y-yes!" gasped Bokker. "And more than my life . . . !"

"You are able to repay the money you stole. You won't have anything left over except the two hundred dollars in your pocket, but you've your life . . . and you've learned a lesson. You'll never gamble again."

"Not even a penny!" Bokker cried fervently. "I'm through. I've had it. I'll never touch another card or die as long as I live."

The stranger nodded. "And now, Mr. Bokker, since you owe me your life . . . since I made all this possible for you, don't you think you owe me . . . a favor?"

A shudder ran through Bokker. He started to rise to his feet, but sank back in the chair. The man's dark eyes seemed to be burning into Bokker's. The long nose seemed more curved, the man's lean, swarthy features gave him an almost predatory look. A ripple of apprehension ran through Bokker.

"Yes," he conceded, "I owe you my life."

"And the favor? You'll do . . . what I ask you?"

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Bokker was slow in replying, but he said finally: "Whatever you wish."

"Good! That's all I wanted, your promise."

Bokker finally forced out the question that had been gnawing at him for the last several minutes. "Who are you? How — how do you know all these things about me?"

"Who am I?" The man shrugged. "You want a name. Very well, let's say my name is Stephen White. I know — I don't look like a Stephen White. I'm a Spaniard. Perhaps my name was once Esteban Blanco. In English that would be Stephen White. You wanted a name and that's as good as any."

"White, Blanco, Smith or Jones," Bokker said. "I guess it doesn't really make any difference. But I can't understand how — you could have known all those things —"

"Not now. Perhaps later . . . Gurney, Kenneth Gurney. He's at the El Casa Mañana." The man who called himself Stephen White got to his feet. "Go and see him."

"That's the favor you want?" Bokker exclaimed. "What am I to see him about?"

"He has a problem."

"What kind of a problem?"

White shook his head. "It's entirely up to you, Bokker."

"Is it a legal problem?"

"Go and see Gurney, that's all I'm asking of you. I can't tell you any more."

White crossed to the door and opened it. Bokker got to his feet, protesting: "Wait a minute, I can't just go barging in on a man. How do I know he'll see me? What am I supposed to do? Wait —"

The man who called himself White merely smiled and went out. Bokker stared at the open door a moment, then strode quickly to it. He stepped out and searched for the mysterious Stephen White but, as earlier, the man had disappeared. A cold feather seemed to slither down Bokker's spine. He half groaned and turned back into his room.

Kenneth Gurney. The name meant nothing to him.

Well, he'd get it over with. He turned away, went out and closed the door. He got into his car, drove it around the curved drive, out onto the highway. To the right and left, on both sides of the wide highway, were vast, fantastic hotel-casinos. Here, surrounded by luxury unequaled even in motion picture sets, people came and gambled. They lost, yes, for all of the casinos did a thriving business, but they lost their money — and sometimes their lives — as pleasantly as it was possible to lose.

The service was exquisite. The hotel rooms were commodious, furnished with the finest products of the Grand Rapids furniture factories. The dining rooms served the best of foods, provided famous bands and paid the highest salaries to performers in the entire entertainment world.

El Casa Mañana — "The House

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of Tomorrow," as phrased in a Spanish possible only in California and Nevada — was a half mile up the highway, toward downtown Las Vegas. It was on the north side of the road, occupying, with its main casino and dining rooms and the bungalows and streets leading to them, possibly ten acres of once barren desert land. It wasn't desert now. Green lawns were everywhere, flowers grew in profusion; there was a huge swimming pool in front of the hotel-casino. Fountains played over a sculpture, water trickled over rocks and rills.

Bokker parked his car and went into the main building. The casino opened off the lobby to the left; the huge main dining room was to the right. Bokker stepped to the desk, where a man in impeccable evening clothes was studying his room records, hoping to find an unoccupied suite, although he knew quite well that El Casa Mañana had none at the moment.

"Mr. Kenneth Gurney," Bokker said.

"Four-D, kindly use the house phone," replied the desk clerk without even looking up from his work.

A battery of house phones stood across the lobby near the bench where several bellboys waited for service calls.

Bokker did not cross to the phones. Instead he turned back and left the hotel. Outside, he walked down a macadam walk into a semi-circular drive behind the main casino and hotel. He cut through a short street into a second semi-circular drive and here he found Bungalow Four-D.

There was a light inside, although the shades and french blinds were drawn.

There was also a light by the door. Bokker pressed the door button and heard chimes bong inside. A voice called out: "Yes?"

Bokker pressed the door button once more. He heard a voice exclaim angrily, then the door was pulled open from inside. A large, truculent-looking man of about thirty-five snapped at Bokker:

"Well?"

"Mr. Gurney?"

"Yes, but I don't think I know you."

"You don't. Mr. Stephen White asked me to call . . ."

"What for?"

"It's rather confidential. If you don't mind . . ."

"I'm busy," Gurney growled, "and I don't know any Stephen White."

"He's a fairly tall man, with a swarthy complexion and a — a rather prominent nose. A Spaniard."

Gurney snorted. "I don't know a single goddam Spaniard. You're selling something, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. I —"

"Insurance? Certainly not magazine subscriptions —"

"No, Mr. Gurney, I'm not selling anything. I happen to be an attorney —"

"A lawyer!" Gurney howled. "So

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that's it. I'm goddam sick and tired of this —"

"A few minutes," Bokker said earnestly. "That's all I want. Mr. White said you had a problem and suggested —"

"Yes, I've *got* a problem," snarled Gurney. "It's the goddam lawyers who're always sticking their noses into people's business. *That's* my problem and here's how I solve it —"

His fist suddenly lashed out and caught Bokker on the point of the jaw. Bokker staggered back, caught his heel on the door mat and went over backwards. He landed heavily, but was not too stunned to scramble quickly to his feet. By that time the door of Gurney's room had been slammed shut.

Bokker looked at the door. No, this was not the moment to persist. A little cooling-off period for Gurney, then another attempt. A more indirect approach, perhaps. More subtle.

He turned away from the bungalow and, as he walked back to the casino-hotel, felt his jaw tenderly. The skin had not been broken, but the blow had been a hard one and Bokker would have a swelling on his jaw.

He re-entered the lobby of the hotel, started for the dining room and stopped. Coming out of the room, toward him, was Linda Molson. Linda Molson from whom Bokker had stolen eight thousand dollars.

She saw him, of course.

"Charles!" she said. "Charles . . ."

"Linda . . ."

The light that had been in her eyes when she had first recognized him faded away. A frown creased her smooth forehead. "I — I didn't expect to see you again."

"Linda," Bokker said earnestly, "I've got to talk to you."

"Is there anything left to say? After what you did . . ."

He reached out, caught her arm and pulled her to one side. "I've returned it, Linda. Eight thousand dollars. Less than a half hour ago, I put it in an envelope and mailed it to you. A check for eight thousand dollars."

"A check," she said pointedly.

He winced. "I had that coming to me. But this wasn't my own check. It was made out by the cashier of the El Llano Casa. I won eight thousand dollars there this evening, and I had them make out a check to you." He saw the continuing disbelief in her face and gripped her arm hard. "Come with me to the El Llano Casa. Perhaps the letter hasn't been mailed yet. I'll give it to you and then you'll know . . ."

Linda Molson shook her head. "I can't now. I've an engagement here."

"It'll only take a few minutes! I'll bring you right back." He hesitated, then added fervently: "Please!"

His obvious sincerity was beginning to have an effect on her. She *wanted* to believe him. "All right," she said, "but let me call Ken first

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and tell him I'll be a few minutes late."

The name did not register immediately and she was walking toward the house phones before Bokker exclaimed and followed her. He caught up with her just as she was picking up one of the house phones.

"Mr. Kenneth Gurney's room," she said, smiling at Bokker.

"Who is Kenneth Gurney?" Bokker asked.

It was too late for her to reply. Kenneth Gurney apparently picked up the phone at the other end of the line. Linda said, "Ken? I'm sorry, but I'll be a few minutes late. Not more than fifteen minutes . . ." She paused a moment, then added, "'By, darling!" She replaced the phone on the receiver.

"I'm going to marry Ken," she told Bokker then. "That's why I'm here."

A sudden coldness seeped through Bokker. "My car's outside," he said inanely, and taking her elbow, headed toward the door.

They were in his car, out on the highway, headed back for El Llano Casa when he said: "When?"

She knew very well to what the question referred, but said, "When, what?"

"When are you marrying Gurney?"

There was the briefest of pauses before she replied: "Tomorrow morning."

"Who is Kenneth Gurney?" he asked. "What does he do?"

He shot a quick sideward glance at her and saw that her forehead was creased in a light frown. "I don't know that he does *anything* special," she said. "He — he has money." There was another pause before she added: "He's interested in sports."

And then Bokker knew. The name Kenneth Gurney was one he had heard before. Only vaguely, now that he thought of it, but it came out now and then in the circles Bokker had moved in in recent months. Ken Gurney. Never Kenneth Gurney, just plain Ken Gurney.

He wasn't exactly a gambler, although he gambled. He wasn't a bookie, either, not as the term is generally used. He took bets from bookies, however. If they had too much money on a certain horse, too much on a certain football game or prize fight, they laid it off. Ken Gurney was the man who took the money. Where he laid it off, only Ken Gurney knew.

A sportsman? Yes, he attended all the sporting events. He was usually in the audience when a favorite basketball team had a bad night and lost to an underrated opponent. He was at ringside when a four-to-one favorite was upset by an underdog fighter and he was almost always in the clubhouse when a horse that had been running badly all season suddenly came to life and won a race and paid in the neighborhood of $64.00 to win. So, you might say Ken Gurney was a sportsman.

And Linda Molson was going to marry Ken Gurney.

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The lights of El Llano Casa zoomed toward Bokker's car and he was turning into the parking area before Linda Molson spoke to him again.

"I *do* love him!"

"Of course you do," Bokker said. "You wouldn't be marrying him if you didn't."

He slipped the car into a vacant parking space, shut off the ignition. She caught his arm. "You're angry!"

"What right have I got to be angry?" Bokker asked harshly. "I stole your money — remember? I embezzled the estate I handled for you. I — I gambled it away. You had every reason in the world to despise me. You could have had me disbarred, sent to prison. Sure, I stalled you; I told you a hundred lies. I hadn't received the money yet, the sale hadn't gone through, the escrow people were causing difficulty. Lies, Linda. I stole the money and I lost it gambling." He opened the car door, stepped out to the macadam.

She got out on her own side and walked with head bent, toward the main door of the vast, rambling hotel-casino. He pushed open the thick glass door, followed her into the lobby.

The droning of the casino play at the right did not attract Bokker. He walked directly to the cashier's counter.

"Has the evening mail left the hotel yet?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"Just a few minutes ago."

Bokker sent a quick look at Linda, saw the momentary suspicion come again into her eyes. "A half hour ago," he said harshly to the cashier, "I cashed in eight thousand dollars' worth of chips. I had you make out a check."

"Yes?"

"To whom did you make out the check?"

The man pursed up his lips in maddening deliberation. "What is your name, sir?"

Bokker groaned inwardly. "Bokker. B-o-k-k-e-r."

The man got a ledger, consulted a page. "Ah, yes, Mr. Bokker."

"To whom did you make out the check?"

The man pursed up his lips again, looked at Linda, then at Bokker. "I don't understand. You *are* Mr. Bokker, aren't you?"

"Of course I am! How often do you make out checks for eight thousand dollars?"

Bokker's anger made no impression on the cautious, suspicious cashier. "What do you wish, Mr. Bokker?"

"I want you to tell me to whom you made out that check for eight thousand dollars. I'm not trying to pull any game on you. I want this young lady to hear the name."

The man hesitated, then let his eyes fall to the ledger. "I think it's all right. Mmm, I made out a check for eight thousand dollars to Linda Molson."

Bokker, watching, saw Linda's eyes light up.

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"And what did I do with the check after you made it out?"

Suspicion again came into the cashier's eyes. "I really could not say, sir. I made out the check and handed it to you."

"But you saw me put it in an envelope, address the envelope. Then I handed it to you. I even asked you to put a stamp on it for me, and mail the letter."

"Yes, Mr. Bokker, but you understand, I cannot guarantee that you actually put the check into the envelope. You *seemed* to . . ."

Bokker said savagely, "This is Miss Molson. I want her to know that I mailed her a check for eight thousand dollars."

"Mr. Bokker," the manager said with assumed patience, "I made out a check for eight thousand dollars to Miss Linda Molson. That much I can testify. I cannot swear that the envelope I mailed for you actually contained that check."

"Charles," exclaimed Linda, "I believe you."

Bokker, turning away from the cashier's desk, almost collided with the man who called himself Stephen White. The latter's eyes were on Linda Molson.

He said: "Mr. Bokker has told you the truth. He sent you the check."

Linda reacted, in surprise, "Why — why, thank you. I did not doubt him."

Bokker, still smarting from the interview with the casino cashier, performed the introductions. "Linda, this is Mr. White. Mr. White, Miss —"

"Molson," murmured Stephen White. "I was about to pay you a visit, Miss Molson."

They had almost reached the doors leading outside when White made his surprising statement. Linda stopped short. "Why on earth should *you* visit me? I don't know you."

"I meant to advise you not to marry Ken Gurney."

Linda gasped in utter astonishment. For an instant she stared at the dark stranger, then her eyes went accusingly to Bokker. "What is this, Charles? Another of your tricks?"

"No!" cried Bokker. "No, Linda. I have nothing to do with this." He turned furiously on the man who was responsible for his still being alive. "Stay out of this. You're only making it worse."

The man shook his head. He spoke to Linda gently, but firmly: "Ken Gurney came to Las Vegas to commit murder. His proposal of marriage to you is only incidental to his chief objective. In the nature of an alibi . . ."

Linda Molson gasped. She gave the dark man a last withering glance, spared some of it for Charles Bokker, then whirling, tore open the thick glass door and ran out of the hotel-casino. Bokker went after her and would have caught up with her except that a taxicab standing before the hotel had the door open. Linda

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went right into the taxi and as Bokker ran up the door was slammed in his face.

"Linda!" he cried. "Wait . . . !"

The taxicab roared away and it was then that Bokker saw that there was a man in the rear seat beside Linda Molson.

He started running across the drive toward the area where he had parked his own car. He heard footsteps behind him and, glancing over his shoulder, discovered that Stephen White was at his heels.

Angry, Bokker continued to his car, tore open the door and turned the ignition key. The motor failed to catch and White went around the car and climbed in beside Bokker.

"Haven't you done enough?" Bokker asked bitterly.

"I'm sorry," White said. "I felt it was necessary."

"You've killed just about any chance I might have had," Bokker continued.

"Chance? What chance did you have an hour ago?" White hesitated, then added, "I must remind you, you would now be dead if I hadn't come to your aid."

The motor caught and Bokker backed the car out of the parking slot. He switched into forward gear and sent the car zooming out of the area onto the main highway leading toward Las Vegas.

He did not speak to White and the latter did not address him again until Bokker stopped the car in the parking lot of El Casa Mañana. Bokker got out of the car and looked inquiringly at White.

White shook his head. "I will wait."

Bokker strode past the main building and turned into the curved drive where he again located Ken Gurney's bungalow. There was a light inside and Bokker pressed the door buzzer. The door was whipped open and Ken Gurney, in gray slacks and loud sport coat, stared at him in amazement.

"Don't you know when you've had enough?" Gurney asked angrily.

Bokker made an impatient gesture. "Is Linda here?"

"Linda?" Gurney's eyes narrowed. "You know Linda Molson?"

"My name is Charles Bokker. Hasn't Linda told you about me?"

"Is there anything to tell?" Gurney stabbed out a forefinger. "You're an old boy friend of Linda's?"

That was something. She had not told her fiancé about him, had not told the man she was going to marry that her lawyer had embezzled eight thousand dollars from her.

A glow of warmth shot through Bokker. He peered past Gurney into the man's suite. Gurney put out an arm, blocking entry. "Now wait a minute, cousin, let's not get too nosy. Linda and I are getting married tomorrow morning and —"

"No you're not!" declared Bokker.

"Who says we're not?"

"I do."

Gurney showed his teeth in a

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wolfish grin. "How long ago is it since I bopped you one? Well, just so you don't —"

He swung a sudden hard punch at Bokker's head, but the latter, forewarned, ducked it neatly. He hit Gurney a hard blow in the stomach that caused the man to fold forward, gasping. But Bokker did not follow through. He squeezed past Gurney into the suite.

A quick glance showed him that Linda was not there. He stepped to the bathroom, swung in the door. It was empty. He turned back to face Gurney, who had a gun in his hand.

"You asked for it," Gurney said thickly.

Bokker threw up his hand. "Wait — this man you came to Las Vegas to kill — does he know about Linda?"

Gurney's eyes glowed. "What's that?"

"I was with Linda at El Llano Casa," Bokker said quickly. "We quarreled and she ran out. She stepped into a taxicab. As it pulled away, I saw that a man was in the cab with her."

"What'd he look like?"

"I got a mere glimpse of him; about all I can say is that he is thin-faced and has a crew cut —"

"Palogus!" Gurney hesitated, then, a frown creasing his face, he exhaled. "He's got Linda."

The phone rang. Gurney gave a start, took a forward step, then stopped. "The hell with it!"

The phone continued to ring. Bokker exclaimed, "It might be about Linda."

"It is," said Gurney, "but I'm not going to give him the satisfaction of making me squirm."

He strode to the closet, got out two suitcases and threw them on the floor. He stooped and opened them up. "I'm getting out of here."

Bokker, aghast, whirled and went to the phone. Gurney sprang to his feet. "Here, you —!" he said, but was too late.

Bokker had whipped up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Gurney," said a harsh voice, "I've got your girl."

Angrily, Gurney tore the phone from Bokker's hand. "All right, Palogus," he snarled. "What's your proposition?" He listened, his eyes narrowing to slits, then sneered: "She isn't worth that much to me. You can go to —"

He would have added "hell," but at that instant Bokker hit him, a hard, smashing blow on the side of the head. The gun flew from Gurney's hand and the sportsman went back against the wall, slid down it to the floor, where he sat, too groggy to rise again. Bokker caught up the phone where it dangled and clapped the receiver to his head.

"Go ahead, Palogus," he said coolly.

Now, however, Palogus was aware of the difference in the voices. "Who's this?" he snapped.

"My name is Charles Bokker,"

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Bokker replied. "Linda can tell you who I am."

There was a moment's silence, then the voice said on the phone: "What's the matter with Gurney?"

"He doesn't feel well," replied Bokker.

"All right," said Palogus, "listen, because I'm only going to tell this once. I want Gurney. I don't care whether he comes on his own, or whether you bring him, but I want him. Four and a half miles west of where you are now is a road leading north across the desert. Five and a half miles. Get out then and walk to the right. And there better not be more than two people. Understand? I'll expect you in twenty minutes. In twenty-five minutes, Linda Molson'll be dead."

There was a click and the phone was dead. Bokker replaced the receiver and found Gurney struggling weakly to his feet. Bokker moved to him, caught the groggy man and straightened him up.

"We're going out to Linda," he said.

Gurney tried to shake his head, but was still too weak. Bokker gripped his arm and propelled the other man to the door. They had walked fifty or sixty yards outside when the cool evening air seemed to suddenly revive Gurney.

He struggled to free his arm from Bokker's grip. Bokker released the arm and jammed his own .32 automatic into Gurney's back.

"Keep moving," he said.

"Palogus'll kill me," cried Gurney poignantly. "He snatched Linda just to get me to come to him."

"He succeeded," said Bokker grimly, "because you're going to him."

Gurney stopped dead in his tracks. "I'm not going."

"You can die a half hour from now," Bokker said ominously, "or you can die right now. You've got three seconds to make up your mind. One . . . two . . ."

Gurney moved.

They reached Bokker's car. And there Bokker was faced with a problem: he had left Stephen White in the car only a few minutes ago, had expected that he would be able to drive the car or keep the gun on Gurney while Bokker drove. But White was not in the car, or anywhere in sight.

"You'll drive," Bokker said, drawing a deep breath. "And I'll be watching you every second, so don't try anything."

He forced Gurney into the car from the passenger's side and when he had slid in far enough, got into the car himself. Gurney started the motor, backed out of the parking slot.

"Where to?"

"West."

Gurney tooled the car out of the grounds, onto Highway 91. It rolled smoothly along the highway, Gurney keeping his eyes on the road ahead, Bokker sitting next to him, his automatic pointed firmly at Gurney.

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Bokker said: "You came to Las Vegas to kill Palogus, didn't you?"

Gurney bared his teeth, but did not take his eyes off the road. "What would you do to a man who rooked you out of a hundred thousand?" He grunted. "I spent three months fixing the deal, put small bets all around the country so nobody'd get wise. I laid out seventy-five thousand and gave Palogus twenty-five thousand, so his fighter would take the dive."

"And he didn't dive," said Bokker.

"He stopped my three-to-one underdog in the second. I lost a hundred thousand . . . and I could have made two hundred thousand net, after paying off my people."

"So you came here to kill Palogus. And Linda Molson — she's just your alibi. You're not in love with her."

"Love," snorted Gurney. "Linda's a good kid. She's got a little money of her own and she's got some looks." Gurney finally sent a sideward glance at Bokker. "So *you're* sweet on her! All right, let me stop the car and get out. You can have Linda."

"Dead?" snapped Bokker.

"Palogus won't kill her. He's a Greek — he's sentimental. He thinks I'll walk in on him to save her life. A man who thinks like that won't kill a girl. A good-looking girl."

Bokker said softly, "An hour ago, *I* was going to kill myself. . . ."

Gurney exclaimed, "What?"

"I embezzled Linda's estate — eight thousand dollars. I lost the money gambling . . . with men like you, Gurney. You probably even got some of the money indirectly. I'm a lawyer. Linda could have had me disbarred, sent to jail. She didn't."

"So that's it! Gratitude. All right, *you* owe her something. Go ahead, face Palogus yourself — and save the beautiful Linda."

"Slow down!" said Bokker. "There's a road here somewhere. . . . There, turn right."

The road was no more than a pair of ruts cutting off from the main highway and winding off into the desert. A prospector or desert rat had cut the ruts into the virgin desert some time ago, and by using them periodically had elevated the ruts to the status of a road.

Gurney braked the car, swung into the ruts and the convertible jolted over the desert.

"Keep going," Bokker ordered, and reaching across, pressed the gun into Gurney's side. "And don't get to thinking that I won't kill you, if you try anything. Palogus'll take you dead as well as alive. Probably prefer you dead!"

Gurney's teeth grated together. Undoubtedly his brain was racing, trying to figure a way out. But the gun in his ribs kept him driving.

The rutted road wound up a low hill, went down sharply on the other side. After a moment Bokker saw a light off to the right and pressed the gun harder into Gurney's side.

"This is far enough."

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Gurney stopped the car. Bokker got out and waited for Gurney to climb out from behind the wheel. Gurney looked at the light a quarter of a mile from the road.

"He's seen us coming. You're not going to walk up to him like a pigeon?"

"The twenty minutes he gave me are almost up," Bokker said. "Let's start walking." He gestured with the automatic.

Gurney hesitated. "Palogus won't be alone, in case you've got some silly idea of getting the drop on him."

"Walk," said Bokker. "Fast!"

The lights were still on in the car, but Bokker had no thought of concealment. His mind was on only one thing — to deliver Gurney to Palogus in exchange for Linda Molson. Beyond that, he didn't think.

The sand was loose and heavy and the going was difficult, but Bokker kept close behind Gurney and whenever the latter showed any sign of slackening his pace, he jabbed him with the muzzle of the automatic.

They approached the adobe shack and Bokker saw a car parked nearby. The lights were on inside the shack, but there was no sign of life. Until a man rose from the shadow of a stunted Joshua palm and snapped:

"Throw out your gun — straight ahead of you."

"Don't do it!" cried Gurney.

A voice called from the adobe shack, "I've got you covered from here — with a rifle!"

Bokker raised his automatic so that the moonlight flashed on it, then threw it straight toward the man by the Joshua palm. It landed at the man's feet. He scooped it up, came forward.

"Put up your hands," he commanded.

"We're done for now," groaned Gurney.

"Up!" ordered the approaching man.

Bokker's hands were already up. Gurney raised his own more slowly. The man came up, frisked Bokker quickly, then moved to Gurney and repeated the procedure.

"All clean," he called to Palogus.

A man appeared in the doorway of the adobe shack, a rifle in his hands.

"Come ahead," he ordered.

Bokker and Gurney, lowering their hands, walked up to the shack. Palogus, a swarthy, stocky man of about forty, stepped aside and Bokker and Gurney entered the cabin. It was a miserably furnished place, containing a couple of bunks, a sheet-iron stove, a table and some chairs, two of them broken.

Linda Molson sat in one of the unbroken chairs, her wrists bound together, a handkerchief gag over her mouth. Bokker, exclaiming, quickly stepped up to Linda and tore down the gag.

"Charles!" Linda said gratefully. Then her eyes went to Gurney; they were clouded, uncertain.

"You had no right to get me into

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this," Gurney said bitterly accusing.

Palogus and the other man came into the cabin. "*I* didn't bring you to Las Vegas, Gurney."

"I came here to get married," snapped Gurney.

"Oh, yeah? Tell the girl that, Ken."

Linda Molson regarded Gurney almost pleadingly. "Is it true, Ken? Is that the *only* reason you came to Las Vegas?"

Gurney gave Bokker an angry look. "You filled her with that. You're in love with her yourself." He turned to Linda. "He's a shyster crook, Linda. You can't believe a word he says."

"Linda knows what I am," Bokker said quietly. "I've been all that you say, Gurney."

"But you came here," said Linda, a new light in her eyes. "Even though you expected to be killed for it."

Bokker made no denial, no affirmation. He half turned to Palogus. "You said you'd let her go."

"Sure," said Palogus, "I said that." He smiled thinly. "But look at it from where I stand. It's me or Gurney. And if it's Gurney, can I leave any witnesses to put the finger on me later on?"

"I told you!" snarled Gurney.

Outside, a voice called: "Hello, the house!"

Both Palogus and his henchman cried out and leaped to the door, guns pointing out. Bokker started to move forward toward Palogus, but just in time the swarthy man whirled and the muzzle of his rifle punched Bokker in his stomach.

"Stand back!" he cried. "So you had the cops tail you!"

"No," exclaimed Bokker. "There wasn't time and anyway I wouldn't have done it because of . . ." His eyes darted to Linda.

Palogus half turned back to the door, but kept one eye on Bokker. "We'll settle that later." He called through the door. "Who are you?"

The voice came again from outside and Bokker now recognized it. "I'm a stranger," the voice of Stephen White said. "I seem to be lost."

Palogus' man, peering out into the moonlit desert, said over his shoulder, "There's only one man, chief."

"Come ahead," Palogus called out.

Feet crunched sand and the figure of Stephen White appeared in the light cast outside by the light of the cabin. He came up to the doorway, stopped a few feet away.

"All right, Mister," snapped Palogus. "Put up your hands and come in."

The man who called himself Stephen White said: "I don't think so." He paused an instant, then: "Bokker . . . ?"

"I'm here," Bokker replied.

"I can't help you," said Stephen White. "It's up to you. . . ."

Palogus, suddenly angered, turned his back completely on Bokker, to challenge the man outside the cabin.

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His rifle came up . . . and then Bokker hit him.

It was a hard blow, a chopping judo blow delivered with the edge of his hand at the base of Palogus' neck. Palogus gasped in agony, stumbled forward. The rifle fell from his hands.

Palogus' henchman, whirling, saw Bokker springing at him. His gun thrust out, roared. . . . A red-hot iron seemed to sear Bokker's left side, but the momentum of his spring carried him through. He chopped again with his open hand, this time sidewards and straight at the henchman's throat.

The blow landed and a gurgle choked off the man's cry. He reeled backwards. Bokker, gasping in pain, clawed at the revolver in the man's hand, got it — and turned to face Gurney.

The gambler, only a second behind Bokker in going into action, had lunged forward to retrieve Palogus' rifle. He had it in his hands now, was coming up with it as Bokker threw down on him with the captured revolver.

"Drop it!" gasped Bokker.

"You fool, they'll kill us!" screamed Gurney.

"Run," said Bokker. "Run for it — but drop that gun first."

Gurney stared wildly at Bokker. It was clear that he was trying to decide if he could snap up the gun for a quick shot at Bokker before the latter could pull the trigger of the revolver.

He apparently decided against it, for he dropped the rifle and started running.

Palogus was moaning and trying to climb to his feet. On hands and knees he looked up at Bokker, saw the gun in the latter's hands. He shook his head to clear away the haze of pain, drew a deep breath and seemed to push himself up to his feet.

"Gurney's gone," said Bokker dully. "It's your turn now. . . ."

Palogus blinked at him, misunderstanding. Bokker gestured with the gun. "Move."

Palogus, bewildered, took a step away, then stopped and looked at the crumpled figure of his henchman. The man was conscious but seated on the floor of the adobe shack, choking and trying to get his breath.

"Take him along with you," said Bokker.

Palogus, eager to get away, caught at his henchman's arm, half dragged, half lifted him. "C'mon, Eddie . . .!" he snarled.

He pulled Eddie through the door. Half running, half stumbling, the two men went out into the desert toward the road. Bokker, looking past the approaching Stephen White, saw Gurney already halfway to the car by the road and knew that Gurney would appropriate it. It didn't matter. Palogus' car was still here.

White came into the shack. "You're wounded," he said, noting

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the blood on Bokker's shirt and coat.

Bokker nodded, turned to Linda and began to untie the heavy cord that bound her wrists.

"It's true, about Ken, isn't it, Charles?" Linda asked tremulously.

Bokker made no reply. He untied the last knot of the cord, untwisted it from about her wrists. She sprang to her feet, chafed her wrists, then exclaimed as she saw the growing stain on Bokker's shirt.

"You're hurt — badly," she cried poignantly.

Bokker shook his head, but Linda was already tearing off his coat. "Help me," she cried to Stephen White. "He's bleeding to death."

White leaned forward, took the shirt between his thumbs and forefingers and tore the material. He peered at the wound. "It's just a flesh wound," he said. "But just the same, we'd better get him to a hospital."

He put his arm about Bokker to help him, but the latter shook it off. "I'm all right," he said, and proved it by walking into the door jamb.

Linda and White helped him into the car.

Seated in the front seat, Linda at the wheel, White on his right, Bokker relaxed. Linda whipped the car over the rough desert, onto the rutted road, far behind Bokker's own car, driven by Ken Gurney.

Linda had turned onto Highway 91 before the man who called himself Stephen White said:

"You paid your debt, Bokker."

"There's just one thing I don't understand," Bokker said slowly. "How did you get out here to the desert . . . without a car? Nine or ten miles in about twenty minutes and . . ." He paused. "*How did you know where to go?*"

Beside Bokker, White shrugged. "That dollar I gave you, Bokker . . ."

"The Spanish piece of eight!" Bokker exclaimed.

Linda shot a puzzled look at Bokker. "A Spanish piece of eight?"

"Mr. White gave it to me," Bokker said. "It was a very old coin —"

"— stolen in the city of Rome, in the year of our Lord 1527."

Bokker gasped. "How — how would *you* know that?"

"I was there," came the astonishing reply. "I was a soldier in the army of His Christian Majesty, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor."

"But Charles the Fifth reigned more than four hundred years ago!" cried Linda. Bokker, pressed against her, could feel the shudder that ran through her body.

The man beside Bokker continued in an even monotone: "You know the history of the Italian campaigns. The Spanish troops fought long and hard in the hopes of loot and then when the unsatisfactory armistice was made with the King of France, the Spaniards rebelled, as did the German Landsknechts. Together they turned on Rome and overran

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it. You know what happened during the eight days they occupied the city. . . ."

Bokker was barely able to nod dumbly.

"We looted the city. We desecrated the church of St. Peter and we imprisoned the Pope himself in the Castle of Sant 'Angelo. We plundered and we pillaged. We murdered and . . ." The misery in Stephen White's voice was vast and genuine. "Before the altar in the Church of Christ's own disciple, a priest was killed for a small sack of silver coins. Pieces of eight. The man who murdered the priest for the silver was a man who had himself once studied for the priesthood and had forsaken it to become a soldier in His Majesty's armies . . . for loot. Well, he found his loot in Rome . . . two hundred and fifty pieces of silver. He still has two hundred and forty-one of them left."

A shudder ran through Bokker and he was finally able to speak.

"You're telling me," he exclaimed incredulously, "that *you* were that soldier?"

"Yes."

"But Rome was sacked more than four hundred years ago!"

"And for all those years I have wandered through the world," replied the dismal, miserable voice of the man beside Bokker. "I killed for those coins — I committed the most heinous of crimes in the most holy of places . . . and my punishment is that I spend the money. One coin in a lifetime. But the receiver of the coin, in his turn, must *earn* that Spanish silver dollar . . . . otherwise it comes back to me. And I must live — and wander and suffer through the ages until the last of those Spanish pieces of silver is gone."

"No!" cried Bokker. "It's too fantastic . . . too incredible."

Stephen White smiled faintly. "Miss Molson, we've reached the city limits of Las Vegas. Would you mind . . . stopping the car?"

Linda put on the brakes so quickly that the tires screeched as the car came to an abrupt stop.

Stephen White opened the door on his side.

"Thank you, Miss Molson." He stepped out of the car. "And you, Mr. Bokker." He closed the door.

"I don't believe it," half whispered Bokker.

"Look —" cried Linda. "He's gone!"

There wasn't time. White could not have gone more than three or four steps away from the car, but Bokker, staring wildly through the door at his right, saw — nothing.

Stephen White was gone.

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The true man of science will never let emotion cloud his thinking; however unanticipated the situation, he will meet it with unperturbed logic. Let us hope that our future pioneers of spaceflight will find inspiration in the rigorously rational sangfroid of Dr. Weir.

The Logic of Rufus Weir

by ARTHUR PORGES

RUFUS WEIR WAS CALCULATING ON the back of an envelope the number of mice, guinea pigs, hamsters, rabbits and monkeys he had sent to Venus. The total was 246 — not including cold-blooded auxiliaries — but he couldn't remember whether that meant 30 mice and 42 hamsters or the reverse. The uncertainty troubled him, because Rufus Weir, Ph.D., M.D., D.Sc. — "our only universal genius in science since Poincaré" — was not used to having doubts, and didn't like the situation.

For example, he was sure that in exactly 6 hours, 18 minutes and 34 seconds the rocket he was occupying (some sentimental technician had scrawled *Marybelle* on its nose, a circumstance which greatly annoyed the doctor) would start its braking action 200 miles above the surface of Venus. He was certain precisely because of those hundreds of laboratory animals which had preceded him on the way. And because he was Dr. Weir.

For ten years, backed by the International Rocket Society, Weir had supervised all the scientific research directed towards attaining the planet Venus. The first small missiles had made barely 500 miles of altitude, and many of their mice had died. But gradually, learning by experience, and using all his talent as a physicist, mathematician, and biologist, he had pushed the rockets higher, made them larger, and secured an increased number of survivors among the rodents privileged (as he would put it in one of his rare facetious moods) to lead even man in this glorious adventure.

Dr. Weir shoved his envelope of computations aside and yawned. He was bored. For weeks he had passed time by solving new problems in the theory of space flight, but even a born mathematician may become stale and detest the most simple and inoffensive symbol of his profession.

In that mood he sought other diversions, even to the point of reciting, with some satisfaction, one of a

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series of lampoons in verse, directed against him by a skeptical wag who apparently had learned nothing from the V-2's of the '40's through the pilotless moon rocket of 1986. In his dry, unaccented voice, Weir had declaimed to the blank walls:

Listen, my children, and you
shall hear
Of the thrilling flight of Dr.
Weir:
His takeoff was brilliant; the
band played Sousa;
He aimed for Venus but hit
Azusa!

Well, he wasn't going to crash in Azusa. In exactly six hours, now, he'd be landing on the second planet, the first terrestrial to do so. Not counting, of course, the mice, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs and monkeys. So much for the comical rhymester. What the lay brotherhood of anti-intellectuals didn't realize was the careful smoothing of the way. The constant feed-back, so to speak, giving fresh data for the next tiny advance. Metaphorically, one reached the stars on a path of dead animals.

Even after the first rocket had landed on Venus (Dr. Weir reflected), and without shattering itself — something the earlier ones had failed to achieve — the telemetering devices indicated that not one animal had survived. Promptly Dr. Weir — the medical doctor in this phase — had re-examined the biological aspects of the problem, and installed new protective equipment designed by the physicist-engineer who shared the same skin. The next missile reported by automatic radio that almost one third of the warm-blooded animals still lived — briefly — and that a few of the hardier creatures, like insects and toads, were nearly normal. On the other hand, the two Capuchin monkeys had gone mad, as indicated by their delta brain waves telemetered back, dying shortly thereafter. All this, of course, without setting foot — paw, rather — on Venus itself.

But there was no reason to despair. One tried again, that's all; mice were plentiful and cheap. From each failure something significant was learned. One by one the loopholes through which disaster crept so insidiously into the silvery projectiles were stopped up; and finally came the joyous day when a rocket not only made a safe landing on Venus, but deposited thereon all but two of its living cargo, and in good health.

It is true, unhappily, that none of the creatures lived more than a few hours; the second planet was inhospitable. Something in the atmosphere, perhaps. Dr. Weir tolerated no perhapses. The pilot-rockets, small and handy, were available in great numbers for just such setbacks. One after another they flamed Venusward, laden with animals to the small bodies of which were fastened highly efficient instruments in communication with the earth.

The data accumulated slowly, but

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they were all meaty. Gravitation was rather less on Venus. The air was good enough, although dampish. What killed the mice, then? Answer — after many rockets and a veritable holocaust of the rodent population — hard radiation. Not very penetrating, either; it was merely that these animals were unduly sensitive to that particular wave length. Nothing daunted, Dr. Weir, medical again, prepared serums, vaccines, and even little plastic-lead coats, as if in parody of those stylish garments draped on Pekes and Boston Bulls by the dowagers of Fifth Avenue.

Against such determination, such painstaking, patient, and rigorous application of scientific method, the gremlins of space travel drew back cowed, pondering wistfully, no doubt, on their halcyon days when they had big, vulnerable, bug-filled B-17's to play with instead of an electronic hard nut designed by that terrible, omniscient Dr. Weir, himself as irresistible as any natural force.

The landing of pilot rocket 63 was celebrated by a champagne supper, attended by gleeful officials of the Society. There was many a toast to Rufus Weir, for his telemetering instruments demonstrated beyond cavil that all the animals had survived and gone about the desperate business of making a living on the second planet. It was hoped that a few might last until Weir arrived. To be sure, they were soon lost track of, as batteries ran down, but extrapolation was easy. If a mouse lived ten hours on Venus, so could a man. And if ten hours, why not as many years? So most people would have inferred; even a few scientists, full of champagne, went that far.

But not Dr. Weir. You could almost see the contempt he felt for such reasoning. One doesn't extrapolate (a) mice into men; (b) hours into years — not with his training.

So away went more rockets crammed with monkeys, hamsters, guinea pigs, mice and rabbits. And finally a few chimpanzees, the elite of the laboratory world. When these all prospered — at least until the reports faded out — Weir was willing to admit, provisionally, that The Time Had Come.

As to who should make the first trip, there was nothing to discuss at all. Even though there was no piloting to be done, the whole flight being automatically controlled, the doctor felt disinclined to trust any of his colleagues on the soil of Venus. They were obviously too emotional. The immature chaps would like as not dash off after the first intriguing thing they saw, instead of carefully weighing every action. You had to be level-headed; no room for mistakes, millions of miles from home in an alien environment. Man was no mouse to survive without detailed planning.

No, he would go first, taking enough supplies for six months; and one at a time selected members could follow, each bringing additional equipment to help establish a

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small colony with facilities for returning, if advisable, a man or two at some later date. He would keep in touch, but he must lead. His pale eyes, wide-set and hypnotic in their conscious intellectual power, stared them down, as always.

"And nobody takes off here until I send word," he ordered.

It took almost five years more to build the first man-carrying rocket, and there was further delay in order to start mass production on those to be used by the other members. Dr. Weir wanted to be sure he would have assistance within six months of reaching his goal; and only when rockets were ready to come off the production line did he blast free, nearly six years after the first animals had landed safely on Venus.

And now, directly underneath, the cloud-wrapped planet awaited its first man. Abandoning his retrospection, Dr. Weir breathed a little sigh of satisfaction — not that he'd had any fears — when, right on time, the braking jets vibrated his ship. Slowly the big rocket decelerated, falling through the fleecy clouds. In a moment he would see the surface, something no earthly astronomer had ever done.

But even a cold-blooded, level-headed person may be excused for wondering at the sight of a city with oddly human overtones in its structures.

Dr. Weir stepped from the ship, took a few tentative breaths and, systematic as ever, tested his respiration, blood-pressure and anti-radiation buffer concentration, deliberately keeping his thoughts undistracted by speculations about the city a few miles from his landing place. It was only after recording all these dial readings in his neat notebook that he looked up and saw Them.

A five-foot mouse came forward on large but still dainty paws, followed by a six-foot hamster, a seven-foot rabbit, and a chimpanzee the size of Goliath.

"Remarkable," said Rufus Weir, the dispassionate, his brilliant mind carrying out with ENIAC rapidity a series of logical inferences from the living data before him. "Obviously," he stated aloud, "the animals that survived, reacting to a lesser gravity and assorted radiation, have mutated and evolved with unusual speed, aided, one presumes, by a brief gestation period. I wonder if that's because my buffer loses its potency after some months? I'll have to be sure to keep myself well-injected."

"You needn't bother," the chimpanzee muttered in a hoarse, thickly accented voice. "You won't be here long."

"I believe you spoke!" Dr. Weir said, his tones only a trifle strident. He studied his dials again. "Not a hallucination; my brain waves are completely normal." He rubbed his big nose. "This isn't quite so obvious a problem: why English?"

"It is our opinion," a six-foot

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rabbit, gray with brown splotches, said in a polite voice, "that human language, mostly English, heard by so many of our ancestors in your laboratories and elsewhere, was impressed upon their brains and germ plasm in such a fashion that after a high rate of mutation, when communication was inevitable, our synapses chose the line of least resistance. Our evolution made language necessary, and so we drew on our racial storehouse for the only one we had experienced." After this peroration it took a deep breath.

The scientist gave the animal a sharp glance. "That is utter nonsense," he said crisply. "You imply the inheritance of acquired characters, a theory which, as every child knows, is completely discredited. Go back and read even Muller."

The rabbit retreated, visibly abashed. "Well, anyway we talk English," it muttered doggedly.

"Don't argue with him," the chimpanzee snapped. "Before you know it, he'll be giving *us* orders!"

"Naturally," Dr. Weir agreed, eying him coldly. "It is the duty of the best brains to give direction to society. Anything else retards the development of civilization." He looked at the rabbit again, which refused to meet his gaze. "Just as another point, your explanation has a logical hiatus miles wide. The animals that heard English never lived long enough to transmit anything; they were mostly small rodents with brief life-spans."

"No," the ape said bitterly. "Not here. No more condescension, please. You and your organization slaughtered hundreds of my ancestors and theirs." He gestured towards the growing crowd of animals.

"Without malice," Weir replied, showing his disgust for such emotional thinking. "There is no room for malice in science. Your people — I don't believe it's correct to refer to all of them as ancestors — died in the interest of humanity so that Venus might be conquered. Nobody hated them; no unnecessary cruelties were practiced."

"Precisely," said a blue-green hamster the size of a pony, its nose quivering. "We bear no malice either. Nobody hates you, and there will be no needless cruelty."

"But if you plan to kill me —?"

"We don't plan any such thing," the chimpanzee retorted, shocked. "In fact, we fervently hope you'll live. You've done as much for my ances — er, people. It's just that you arrived most opportunely. Our first long-range rocket, designed for Mars, has been held up for want of the proper laboratory animal. Everything possible will be done to insure your survival — on Mars, of course. But don't accuse us of malice: that's unreasonable, and it hurts."

Dr. Weir bowed slightly, a gesture reverting to his student days at New Gottingen.

"The logic of your position is unassailable," he said gravely.

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"Bon voyage," they replied, equally courteous, leading him to the waiting missile. . . .

Unfortunately the flight sponsored by the Venerian Rocket Society of Mice, Hamsters, Rabbits, Guinea Pigs, Monkeys and Apes was a failure, blowing up almost half a million miles from Mars.

But the animals were not disheartened. They knew the value of persistence; and as long as they could send terse, provocative messages in Dr. Weir's name, they were assured of fresh specimens for experimental use — direct from the eager ranks of the International Rocket Society — every month. But just to play it safe, they asked, on the pretense that female technicians were needed, for a few competent women, receiving a choice lot recruited by the terrestrial organization, and not long out of the science classes of Vassar, Bryn Mawr, Connecticut College and similar sources of feminine scholarship.

It is sad to report that none of his colleagues (chosen naturally from those not reserved for breeding) showed the same admirable objectivity as Dr. Weir. Many, in fact, displayed rather childish signs of resentment at finding themselves re-routed to Mars, with passage not guaranteed.

Coming Next Month

Remember Poul Anderson's swashbuckling thriller *Time Patrol* (F&SF, May, 1955)? Mr. Anderson brings back the Time Patrol in our next issue (on the stands in early November) with an equally paradoxical adventure in the novelet *Delenda Est*. The same issue will also include Isaac Asimov's *Dreaming Is a Private Thing*, a sensitively perceptive story on the nature of people — and of storytelling, and two unusual reprints: Dr. Robert S. Richardson's controversial and stimulating *Saturday Review* article, *The Day After We Land on Mars*, and one of the least known but most important of Edgar Allan Poe's experiments in science fiction, *Mellonta Tauta*. There'll be an assortment of other stories, new and old, plus Charles Beaumont's quarterly survey of s. f. films . . . *and* the moving and illuminating final section of Theodore Sturgeon's short novel.

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

IT SEEMS AS IF THE HEALTHIEST branch of science fiction publishing today may well be the field of paperback books, both reprint and new.

The number of paperback titles published is markedly up over previous years, whereas hardcover titles and magazines are down, and show every sign of slipping even further.

What's more important, there are not only more titles available, but more copies are selling of each title, at least with such discriminating houses as Bantam, which has established itself as the leader in paperback s.f.

The trade organ *Inside Bantam Books* recently reported: "Once again this month [July, 1955] a science-fiction title leads the 10-day check figures — and with the highest percentage ever recorded for a Bantam Book in this category. 'Man From Tomorrow' by Wilson Tucker came in with an unusually strong figure. . . . To no one's surprise, 'The Seven Year Itch' was second among July titles."

When science fiction starts outselling sex (as exemplified by Marilyn Monroe yet!), the phenomenon deserves some examination. So let's take a look at the science fiction and fantasy now available on the newsstands:

The best value for the money, I'd say, both in generous quantity and high quality, is two anthologies by Groff Conklin, one a reprint, the other a paper original. SELECTIONS FROM SCIENCE-FICTION THINKING MACHINES (Bantam, 25c) includes 12 stories constituting a little over half the wordage of Mr. Conklin's 1954 Vanguard anthology. The editor's excellent introduction and notes have been omitted, and the adroit pattern of the fictional history of robotics largely obscured; but the selections are admirably chosen and offer 80,000 words of firstrate reading. Even more generous is OPERATION FUTURE (Permabooks, 35c), which contains over 125,000 words, plus plentiful Conklin commentary (which keeps getting better with every book). There are two novelets and 17 short stories, all of them completely new to anthologies and all of highly readable quality. No absolute masterpieces (save probably Jack Finney's wondrous account of General Grant's air force), but a gratifyingly solid lot, mostly from *Astounding*, *Galaxy* and this magazine.

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The Tucker MAN FROM TOMORROW (Bantam, 25c) mentioned above is a retitling of his 1954 WILD TALENT — an effective melodrama of ESP and espionage, with some of Tucker's most human and sensitive writing. Even better are two other reprint novels: William Sloane's 1937 TO WALK THE NIGHT (Dell, 25c), extraordinary for its date and still an unusually powerful blend of detective-suspense and s.f., and C. M. Kornbluth's 1953 THE SYNDIC (Bantam, 25c), the lightest and most purely entertaining of Kornbluth's extrapolations — this time concerning a future in which gangsterism has become the legitimate government. Graham Greene's NINETEEN STORIES (Lion, 35c), originally published in 1949, contains 6 fantasies, of uneven but often rewarding quality. As for M. K. Jessup's non-fiction THE CASE FOR THE UFO (Bantam, 25c) . . . well, it almost (if not quite) cancels out all I've been saying about the high level of the Bantam list.

The original paperbacks published by Ace, so often interesting in the past, have been less satisfactory recently, but usually redeemed by the reprint which accompanies them in the same topsy-turvy Double-Book. Dwight V. Swain's THE TRANSPOSED MAN (Ace, 35c) certainly does not deserve billing as a novel; it's a 1953 novella from *Thrilling Wonder* shorter than many stories we've published complete (along with much else) in one issue of F&SF — fast, wild, readable and fairly foolish. But the double volume includes a reprint of J. T. McIntosh's 1954 ONE IN THREE HUNDRED, surely McIntosh's best work and one of the most human science fiction stories by anyone. Jack Williamson's DOME AROUND AMERICA (Ace, 35c) is a 1941 *Startling* story which would rank in about the third quintile of the author's work; but the book is brightened by a reprint of Charles L. Harness' 1953 FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY (retitled THE PARADOX MEN) which is almost as much fun as vintage van Vogt. Poul Anderson's NO WORLD OF THEIR OWN (Ace, 35c) is an over-abbreviated version of the 1955 *Astounding* serial THE LONG WAY HOME — competent interstellar adventure, but disappointingly familiar and conventional for so able a writer. Its companion is a reprint of Isaac Asimov's FOUNDATION, the 1942–44 *Astounding* series first collected as a book in 1951 and now retitled (and sharply abridged) as THE 1,000 YEAR PLAN.

Without review, I should like (hopefully) to call your attention to my own collection, FAR AND AWAY (Ballantine, 35c). This contains 11 of my stories, mostly from *Unknown* and F&SF, 7 of which are new to science-fantasy book form — some of them rewritten since their first appearance. Comments eagerly welcomed; in this case, *you* are the reviewer. Please let me know your verdict.

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We've published several stories by Alan Nourse, but this is the first appearance in this magazine of the particular Nourse specialty: medical science fiction. Mr. Nourse (or more properly Dr. Nourse, since he received his M.D. earlier this year) has created the fascinating concept of the Hoffman Center, a foundation of the future in which daringly profound research is carried on through the use of Medical Mercenaries — men who enter voluntary (and very well-paid) bondage to serve as guinea pigs. The Hoffman Center has served as background for the recent novel A MAN OBSESSED (*Ace*) *and for various short stories. This newest episode from its annals tells of a psychological probe beyond any previous penetration of man's mind — and of the terrors that guard man's secret from himself.*

The Expert Touch

by ALAN E. NOURSE

IT WAS EIGHT IN THE EVENING when Gunderson burst into the inner office, red-faced and panting, his white lab coat flying behind him. "Doc — have you got a minute?"

Dr. Miles Palmer looked up from the tape-speaker with an impatient scowl. He went on dictating.

"Doc, listen —"

The speaker clicked off sharply. "I haven't time to talk to you now." Dr. Palmer glared at Gunderson, and raised the speaker again.

"*Doc* —" The research resident took a deep breath. "Chris Taber just quit the project."

Palmer broke off in mid-sentence, turning slowly around until he faced Gunderson. "He *what*?"

"I said, *Chris Taber has quit the project.*"

Palmer stared at him heavily. Then: "Nonsense. He can't quit. What are you talking about?"

"He *quit* — that's all. He woke up this afternoon, and looked around, and said, 'Where are my clothes? I'm leaving.' Just like that."

Lines of disgust formed on Palmer's face. "Don't be ridiculous, Peter. So he has a little reactive depression . . . He'll sleep it off. I'll talk to him in the morning." He turned back to the tape recorder.

"Doc — you don't understand. *He means it.* He wants to leave right now, tonight, this minute —"

"Well, he *can't* leave right now,"

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Palmer snapped. "What are we supposed to do with this project? Junk it? He signed a contract with us, we've got a half a million dollars in equipment and two years of hard work sunk into Chris Taber —"

Gunderson spread his hands helplessly, perching his wiry frame on the edge of the desk. "That contract won't hold water. A man can't legally sign a contract compromising his own life — not even with the Hoffman Center. Those days are gone forever. You know that, Doc."

Slowly Dr. Palmer rose from the desk and walked over to the wide window. He didn't look like a psychiatrist. He was a big, heavy-boned man. Something in his build made his every movement seem clumsy. His face was round and heavy under a shock of thick brown hair — almost a dull face, amiable, but slightly stupid. He had learned from long experience to cultivate the appearance. People weren't so afraid to talk to him, to open up with their words and feelings.

He stared down through the darkness at the long ward buildings of the Hoffman Medical Center. The lights from the windows winked up yellow in the evening mist. The wards were quiet now, but it was a deceptive quietness, for the Hoffman Center was never really quiet.

To prolong life and to study the nature of Man — that had been Reuben Hoffman's dream. The Center was the fruit of that dream, multiplied a hundredfold in the 80 years since its founding. Here was the fountainhead of medical research, the hub of study, treatment, and cure. Through the years it had grown and changed — but the idea upon which it had grown still remained: to study the nature of Man, one must study Man. . . .

The psychiatrist shoved his hands into his pockets and turned sharply on Gunderson. "How much does Chris Taber really know about this project?"

The little resident shrugged unhappily. "Officially? Nothing. Well, practically nothing. He's had no psych training, and we've told him just as little as we could possibly get away with. But he's learned fast."

Palmer nodded angrily. "And *now*, all of a sudden, he decides that he's going to quit. Why?"

"I don't know — but I can guess. I think he hit something today. I think it scared him silly — shook him so hard he won't go near it again." Gunderson hesitated, glancing up at the psychiatrist. "Doc, there's only one thing he could have hit."

"I know it," said Palmer grimly. "That's exactly why we simply must not lose him now."

All right — what do we have on Christopher Taber?

A medico-psychiatric chart nine inches thick.

Three hundred and sixty-two microtapes, both sides recorded, filed and cross-indexed.

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Seven thousand miles of film recording from auditory and visual cortex stimulation, filed and cross-indexed.

Twenty-two thousand punched cards from the frontal and parietal memory storage centers, intricately cross-indexed and interconnected, tagged, integrated, sensitized, and cross-sensitized.

Two long years of work — intense, driving, incredibly difficult work . . .

But what do we *have* on Christopher Taber?

Age 28. Five feet eight inches tall. Weighs 166 lbs. IQ 131. Normal blood pressure, good musculature, excellent kidney function, no history of liver disease. A grade I soft apical systolic murmur, unquestionably functional.

Berkhardt talked to him down at Penn and sent him up to the Hoffman Center. "Right intelligence range, nothing tying him down just now. Looks like he might fill the bill for you."

Berkhardt was right. Good material, physically. Interested — a fuzzy thinker, lots of idealism, but pretty ineffectual when it came down to performance. Fine, fine . . .

A good-looking kid — well built, wide frank eyes, smiling when he walked into the office. But something lurking in those eyes . . . anxiety? Ah, he starts talking. *Lots* of anxiety. Hostility there, too, pretty well covered up, but the raw edges show. Hates the world, hates himself. Give him something *fine* to do, something for the good of mankind, and he'd feel *so* much better, soothing away the sharp edge of guilt. . . .

Only a guess, of course — but wait, there's support for it. Failures, a long chain of failures. Is he afraid he fails because he's a coward? Probe that one — *bango!* Guilt feelings all over the place.

Questions about the project, then. What is it? What are we trying to do? What will it mean if we're successful?

It will mean the end of insanity, Chris. The first real blow to mental illness, a weapon to split it open and destroy it, forever. It will mean the opening of a human mind, in all its power, and strength, and weakness. It will let us see for the first time what a human mind is really capable of. . . .

(Berkhardt was right. This is the man we've been looking for. Not unique in any way, any one of a thousand men might do, but Taber is *here*, he likes the sound of what we're saying! If we can only —)

Volunteering, then. Eyes shining — inspired. Blindly, of course, he has no real concept of the job he's agreeing to, but we can handle *that* all right when the time comes.

The work had begun, then. Two years of it. And now the end was in sight, so very near. . . .

They walked down the two flights of stairs to the work lab. Gunderson,

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with his wry sense of humor, used to call it The Pit. But there was no humor now in the resident's thin face as Palmer followed him down the stairs.

Fear.

Chris Taber was afraid. It was fear that had stopped him now — nothing else. Call it acute anxiety reaction. Call it an abrupt reshaping of the ego-defenses. Call it a regressive hysterical reaction-formation . . .

Call it ishma-kabibble. It all boiled down to one word. Fear.

They pushed through the swinging door into the corridor, and an overwhelming wave of frustration and defeat swept into the psychiatrist's mind. It caught him with his defenses down; he wanted to clench his fists and pound them on the wall and scream out his rage and anger. It seemed to Palmer that he had been fighting fear for as long as he could remember. He had been blocked by fear, thwarted by fear, threatened and condemned and reviled by fear.

He had found no way to beat it. He had fought it with every device at his command, and still it was there, powerful and inexorable. He knew that men's minds were mired in fear, bound down and strapped, helpless to do anything but tremble and hide and wait hopefully for the end of fear to come.

But Miles Palmer was a stubborn man. He had worked with maniacs screaming from the back wards of the mental hospitals, and he had worked with brilliant men reduced to helpless silence by fear. One unshakable conviction carried him on: *that at the core of every man's mind was a* something — *an Ego, an I, a tenuous spark of individual being — the wonderful spark of humanity itself. It lay hidden, defending itself desperately from conscious knowledge behind a thick bastion of lies, rationalizations, distortions, built up layer upon twisted layer, to protect it.*

And fear was its powerful weapon. To conquer that, to find a way to penetrate those defenses to the very depths, would allow a man to understand himself at last, completely and ultimately. Somehow, a man must find that way. The trail had to be blazed just once, for others to follow. Then, at last, the tenuous spark could burst into full flame.

That was Miles Palmer's dream: to find a way. Chris Taber had started to blaze the trail. Now, almost to the goal, he was being driven back.

By fear.

They unlocked the door, and stepped into the lab. It was very small, like a tiny projection room, with a wide gray plastic screen sweeping around three sides, curving in on the top and bottom. In the center was a chair. Behind were the controls, built with incredible care. No psychiatrist could have done this work without the help of others — the engineers, the neurosurgeons, the biophysiologists, who had de-

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signed it. Palmer's mind flickered back to the weeks spent in conference — the endless discussions, the arguments, the days spent just groping for words to express what he wanted to do, what instruments he had to have . . .

In order to lead Chris Taber slowly, step by step, to the truth. To guide him, to drive him, to dig out his memories, to confront him with them, help him to dodge, defend, fight, flee — and finally face what was buried there. To help him find the way.

The analysts two centuries before had tried, and failed. They had sent men searching the compartments of their minds — but they were using a flimsy, superficial tool. They could only scratch the surface. To go further, new ways had to be found, new instruments and techniques.

There were no such instruments. The neurosurgeon had cried, "Miles, be sensible! I can't open a man's skull on the strength of sheer speculation!" But then, ultimately, he had done it. The physiologists had growled about blood-brain barriers, and gone gloomily back to their laboratories — but later, half-amazed at themselves, they had come out with answers. The engineers had said, "Doc — you're saying words, but they don't mean anything!" so he had patiently explained, laboriously drawn diagrams that meant something to engineers, and when he had finished they had doodled unhappily and said, "But there aren't any such instruments. It can't be done."

Then they went ahead and did it.

Palmer shook his head and turned to Gunderson. "All right, let's see the films from today's run."

The light flicked off, and the screen glowed. Images flickered, wavered, steadied. "He was back in the same old treadmill he's been in all week," Gunderson growled. "The love-hate conflict with his father." He paused. They watched the shifting images closely, images picked up and integrated through a thousand tiny receptors in Taber's mind, translated through wires and tubes and amplifiers into living ghosts on the screen. "Most of this is pure garbage. Fabrication, plain and simple. Defenses a mile thick. *Something* at the bottom, though. It took him weeks to get this far . . . uh, oh. Watch."

The images flickered still more, shifting with frightening rapidity. From behind them the projectors buzzed. Confused flashes, forms, *feelings*, converging on the screen into a tight spiral —

"Here's where he hit it — just a second — *now!*"

Palmer exhaled slowly. He watched the screen, feeling sick inside. Then he snarled and snapped on the lights. "And he picks now to quit! He got a deep look there, Peter — right there! Just a glimpse — but he saw the way through to the end." He spread his hands bitterly. "One more

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drive and he could split it wide open —"

"Or vice versa," said Gunderson.

Palmer shot him a glance. "Of course."

"What would his chances be, Doc?"

"How should I know? Slender. But we've never been so near. We can't lose this chance."

Gunderson's face was drawn and tired. "Doc, that's easy to say, but *we're losing it right now.* Chris isn't going through with it. And we can't force him to."

"Of course, of course." Palmer's voice was distant. He was leafing through a thick sheaf from Chris Taber's chart.

"We can't use any fancy stuff, either. We're on the thin edge of the law right now, Doc. You know that."

"We won't need any fancy stuff."

Gunderson stared at him. "You think you can do something?"

"*Do?* You don't think I'm going to stand here and wring my hands, do you? Good lord, of course there's something I can do." He tucked the chart under his arm. "Chris is a good boy. All he needs is a taste of the whip. He'll go along with us."

"The expert touch, eh?"

For the first time, Palmer smiled. "The expert touch. But gently."

"I said I was checking out of this lousy job, and that's just exactly what I meant!" Chris Taber's fists clenched at his side as he glared down at Miles Palmer, and his body shook with anger. The door behind him stood open; he gave it a kick that closed it with a crash. "I've had all the slapping around from your goons that I'm going to take, so call them off! *I've quit* — is that clear enough?"

Palmer stared at the man in amazement. "But Chris —"

"Yes, 'But Chris!' " Taber snarled. "You and your innocent face and your oily talk! What happened? Couldn't the boys handle it for you this time? Too much for them, eh? Had to call in the boss." He slammed both hands down on the desk and leaned across to the psychiatrist: "Well, save your breath this time, headshrinker! Don't bother to talk, because it won't work any more. Don't try to scare me, either. Maybe thirty years ago the Hoffman Center could buy its guinea pigs like meat on a block and hold them to it when they signed their lives away, but there are laws now, remember? I know the law, and the law says no Medical Mercenary can be forced to continue a job he doesn't like." His teeth showed in a nasty grin. "Well, *I don't like it.* I'm leaving, and if you try to stop me, I'll —"

"Chris!" Dr. Palmer's eyes were wide. "I'm trying to tell you that you're perfectly free to go."

Chris Taber blinked. His body was still shaking. "Free?"

"Of course."

Confusion flickered across Taber's face. "But they told me —"

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"The door is behind you. The elevators are along the corridor to the right. The street is seventeen stories down."

Slowly, Chris Taber straightened up. He opened and closed his hands experimentally, as though suddenly surprised to find that he still had them. Then: "Well . . . then I guess I'll go." With a half-shrug, he turned for the door.

As his hand touched the knob, Palmer said, "Chris."

The man whirled as if he had been stung.

"Your check." Palmer drew a bit of yellow paper from his pocket, dropped it on the desk. "You don't want to forget that."

Chris Taber walked slowly back to the desk, suspicion heavy in his eyes. He took up the check, and his face turned red. "Oh, no," he said softly. "You can't buy me off like that!" He dropped it as if it were contaminated. "Keep your money. I wouldn't come back for any amount of money."

"Nobody's asking you to come back," Palmer said softly. "The money is already yours. You contracted for $100,000. The work is nine-tenths finished. This $90,000 is yours. You've already earned it."

The man picked up the check again. His fingers trembled violently. "Look, Doc, I told you —"

"No strings on it, Chris. Not one."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Taber said, "Doc, I can't take this money."

Palmer looked hurt, and stared at the wall. He said nothing.

Taber tossed the check back, spread his hands. "Look, it's nothing personal, Doc. I mean, you've been swell to me right along, and I know you've got everything sunk into this project, and I — well, I just want you to know I don't hold anything against *you*. I — didn't mean what I said a little while ago — you've been swell —"

Palmer turned his eyes to Taber sourly. He didn't say a word.

Taber made a gesture toward the check. "I — I don't want the money, I just want you to understand why I'm quitting like this. I didn't know what I was getting into. I didn't realize —" He broke off, sank down on a chair with a nervous laugh. "Sure, I had some idea about what you were trying to do — I was *interested* in the project. I — I didn't come into it like an ordinary skid-row Mercy Man after the Big Cash. You know that, Doc. I came into it because I thought — well, I thought it was worth while, I thought it was a great project — you know."

Dr. Palmer just stared at him. He said nothing.

With a little gesture of defeat, Taber rose to his feet, started for the door. Then he stopped. "I know what you think," he said sharply. "You think I'm yellow — isn't that right? You think I'm just another chicken-livered coward that quits whenever things get rough. I

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know what you're thinking. Well, Doc, that just isn't true! I've got plenty of nerve, I've got as much guts as the next guy. But this was different. You didn't *tell* me about this. I — I — I went along with you, I did everything you wanted, didn't I? I worked hard for you, didn't I? But then yesterday I began to see what I'd gotten into. I walked in there and I got slugged like I've never been slugged before."

The man's voice had risen plaintively. He stood up, turning to Palmer, his face twisting. "Can you understand that? *I got scared, Doc!* I'm scared right now — I'm so scared I can hardly hold my hands still. I'm too scared to go back in there again. I — I hate like hell to leave you in the lurch like this, after all this work, but I'm *scared* —"

His eyes were tortured, pleading, begging to be understood. . . .

Palmer didn't move a muscle.

There was dead silence in the room.

Slowly Taber's face drained of color. He slammed his fist down on the desk. "God damn it, man, can't you see what I'm trying to tell you? *I can't do it!* I want to, but I *can't*. I just realized that I could *die* in there — I could come out of it *blank*, without any mind at all. I could even come out of it dead —" His eyes narrowed. "You know that. You've known it from the very first, haven't you? But you didn't tell me. You cheated me, right down the line, didn't you? You lied to me, you twisted the truth around and smoothed everything over — oh, but you're skillful at that sort of thing, aren't you? *But all the time you knew.* Well, why pick me for the ax? Why not you? Why not Gunderson? Or one of your other flunkies? Why pick *me* to dig a hole through my brain? Why didn't you level with me and tell me what I was walking into, instead of leading me by the nose until I was in so deep I couldn't even wiggle?"

Palmer's hands clenched the chair arms. He didn't say a word. He just looked at Chris Taber.

"Doc, for God's sake, what do you want me to say? Why do you just sit there and stare at me? *Can't you hear what I'm trying to say?* Doesn't it *mean* anything to you? Can't you see that I *want* to do it, that I just can't?" Taber's face was working; he stared down at the psychiatrist as his words died away into the deadly silence of the room. And then, suddenly, involuntarily, he was sobbing — huge, wracking sobs that shook his shoulders, forced themselves out, beyond his control. He sank down on the chair, buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Doc, I tried to do it, I *tried*, with everything I had. But it was the same old story, just like always. Every time I've ever tried to do anything, it's always gone sour, somehow. Everything I've ever touched has gone bad." His breath was ragged in the silent room. "This was going to be *it*,

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this was the big job, something big enough to make up for all the rest, and now it's gone sour too —" He sat with his face in his hands, hiding from the silence. Then: "Doc, I need help. Don't just sit there — *help me!* What do you want me to do?"

For the first time the psychiatrist's face softened. "I want you to come back, Chris."

There was no answer. The man sat hiding his face for a long time. Then, slowly, he pulled himself to his feet and shuffled to the door.

The door closed behind him.

The psychiatrist sat motionless, his eyes closed. Gradually his grip on the chair arm relaxed. Perspiration broke out on his forehead. He waited, not daring to move a muscle.

He waited twenty minutes. It seemed like twenty years.

Then Gunderson burst through the door, eyes shining triumphantly. "Doc, I've always wanted to shake the hand of a real honest-to-Christ living breathing genius! All day long we've had him down there — begging him, pleading with him, threatening him —"

"*He came back?*"

"He came back! He walked up here ready to tear your throat out, and then half an hour later back downstairs he comes like a lamb to the —"

"*Shut up!*" Palmer's hand crashed down on the desk top, sending a paperweight flying to the floor. Then, slowly, he unclenched his fist. "I'm — sorry, Peter. I just didn't know whether we were going to make it. I didn't mean to snarl." He pushed his chair back as though he were suddenly very old. "But one thing I want you to know: I think we'd better bring that man through alive."

It was the same as a dozen times before — and yet, this time, there was a subtle difference. He had spent many hours sitting in the soft chair, feeling the gentle tingle of electrodes in the visual cortex, in the frontal cortex, picking, probing, gently stimulating, bringing back memories and times and places and people so long since buried that he had forgotten they had existed, translating and amplifying the tiny impulses, projecting them before his eyes on the huge screen which grew and grew until it seemed to swallow him, mind and body. He remembered the long, wearisome weeks they had spent, testing the instrument, adjusting it with minute care, until it had become such a part of his own body that there was no strangeness about it, no strangeness in this room filled with the clearing shadows of his mind. He had spent many days walking deep into the dim corridors of his mind, always probing, seeking —

But it was different now. Every barrier he had broken down had brought a new wave of fear — overwhelming, blinding fear. Last time he had glimpsed the truth behind

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the barrier — only a flicker, the barest flash, but enough to drive into his mind with sledge-hammer force one simple, elemental fact: *the truth was there.* And fear had driven him back in a wave of paralyzing strength.

"The defenses will be powerful," Palmer had said. "But you can find a way to peel away all the lies that your mind is built up on. Only you can find a way to do it. We can help, but we can only help." Such a long, long time ago he had said it. "That is the way to sanity, Chris. *You can show us the way.*"

Even then, he hadn't believed it. His mind had laughed, behind half-closed doors, jeered, ridiculed the idea. There *wasn't* any way, his mind had told him. There couldn't be. Go along with it, sure, but it's ridiculous to try —

Until he saw one flicker of the truth. He found that there *was* a way. It led through the valley of madness, but it was there.

Now he knew what fear could mean.

He was coming back to the place where he had been before. Fear was there, terror, revulsion and loathing. To touch the untouchable, to probe the depths that no man had ever probed, to know that tearing down the lies could mean madness and death, and to find, somewhere, the courage to go ahead and tear them down — it took very great courage. But that was the way the path led. Fear could destroy; he knew it, horribly. He felt his strength give as he moved deeper and felt the fear fighting him back, tearing him away, screaming its terrible warning —

Outside, in the room around him they watched, and waited, and recorded. They knew it was different this time, too. They could see it on the screen. They could sense it in the electric silence of the place. They could feel it in their cold fingertips, in the way the skin prickled on the backs of their necks. For the first time, they knew that Chris Taber was plunging straight to the core. No fabrications now. No secret laughter. No mock sincerity, no turning it into a battle of wits this time, no more pretending to cooperate — all defenses themselves, peeled away mercilessly in the first five minutes —

Gunderson stepped into the soundproofed booth behind the room and snapped the intercom switch frantically. "Get Palmer down here, fast. This is it, we're hitting bottom —" His voice was almost a whisper.

They waited, and watched. They saw the blood pressure curve shoot up, watched the heart rate drive ahead under the burden of fear. They waited, watched instant by instant for the danger signals, waiting . . .

Suddenly he was screaming, crying out, twisting in his seat; he was begging to be released, and they

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did not release him, and he caught his breath in huge gasps and thanked them through clenched teeth for not listening, and dug in again. His fear was a palpable, vibrating thing in the room, a hard, brutal thing that grew and grew. . . .

He was in shock when they carried him from the room. They pumped whole blood and plasma into his collapsed veins, gave him cerebral stimulants, warmed him, breathed for him —

Prayed for him —

Hours later, Palmer gave a weary nod and said, "He'll be all right. Call me the minute he comes up."

They called him at three o'clock in the morning. He dragged himself off the couch in his office, groggy with sleep; then realization struck him, and he raced down the corridor to the quiet-room.

Chris Taber was staring at the ceiling. At first Palmer could not see his eyes. He was breathing slowly, gently. Palmer walked across to the bed, touched the man's hand. "Chris. Thank God."

Chris Taber stared at the ceiling.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling fine."

"Good, good." Palmer's eye flickered to the transfusion bottle, and back to the man's face. "You did it, didn't you? You found the way."

"Yes. I found the way."

The psychiatrist reached for the recorder button, eagerly, snapped the tape on. "Tell me what you can now," he urged. "Don't strain yourself; if you get the least bit tired, just say so and we'll get more tomorrow. Just tell me how you did it, whatever way seems most natural to you —" He broke off, frowning.

The man on the bed was laughing.

"What's the trouble, Chris?"

Taber stopped laughing, and turned his head toward Palmer. His eyes caught the psychiatrist's eyes viciously. "How do *you* feel, Doc?"

The frown deepened. "I feel fine, Chris, just fine. Now —"

"Oh." The voice was curiously flat. "I thought maybe you'd feel a little bit dirty, inside."

Palmer's eyes fell. "I know," he said gently. "It was tough. But you came through —"

"You don't know anything," Taber said. "Tough! It was horrible. It was twenty years of torture in that room." He pulled himself up on an elbow. "I knew what it was going to be like in there. I didn't want to go in. But you were very clever — I went in anyway. It didn't matter too much to you whether I wanted to go or not, did it, Doc?"

"Chris — I didn't make you come back to us."

"*That's a lie.*" Taber's face was very white. "I learned some things while I was in there. All of a sudden I understood things I never understood before. I learned an *awful* lot."

"Chris, you're getting excited. Of course you *thought* you wanted to quit, but unconsciously —"

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"*Don't lie to me any more, Doc!* I'll catch you every time — now. You made me go in there. Oh, it was clever, all right, the touch of an expert. It all went just the way you planned it, didn't it? You knew I'd come in angry and bitter, so you cut the bottom out of that, first thing. Then you knew I'd feel guilty about quitting, so you helped me along. You helped me to feel *more* guilty. And then you just sat there. You knew the one thing I couldn't stand — silence! So when I couldn't stand it any more, I'd start talking to cover it up —"

"Chris, you're dreaming things —"

"You're lying, Doc. I needed help, I needed it bad, but you wouldn't give it to me. One word from you would have been enough. One tiny word of support at the right time, and I could have walked out of there a human being."

Palmer shook his head helplessly. "Chris — it's over now. *You're through it.* You found what we have to know, you found a way. What does it matter how?"

Taber just glared at him.

"All right, so I made you come back. I had to do it, we'd have had to start from scratch again with somebody else, junk two hard years of work —"

"Doc! I could have died. That was *my life* you were gambling with, *my mind.*"

Beads of sweat stood out on Palmer's forehead. Suddenly he was dizzy, the room seemed to be spinning around him. "All right, all right — *I know it.* I knew it then. I did it, I admit it. I thought I had to — maybe I was wrong, but we won the gamble, Chris!"

"You were wrong, Doc. *You had no right to send me in there.*"

Palmer's face was white, his whole body was trembling. "Chris, you found the way — *how did you do it?*"

The man was silent for a moment. Then he sank back on the pillow with a little smile. "You're the clever one, Doc."

Palmer stared at him.

"Find out for yourself."

Note:

If you enjoy THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, you will like some of the other MERCURY PUBLICATIONS:

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Cleve Cartmill's agent sold us this as fiction, and it's probably wisest to publish it as such, but . . . Further comment after you've read the story . . . or autobiographical article.

Youth, Anybody?

by CLEVE CARTMILL

MOST EDITORS I KNOW FROWN ON stories about writers, or stories about stories.

Most editors I know are writers themselves, and they know that writing about writers or stories is a lazy man's way out.

It's easy to dream up a story about a writer who dreams up a story about a writer who . . .

But here is a story about a story that should be told.

It should be told, for one reason, because the editor of this magazine is a friend of mine and I enjoy reading his magazine. I'd like to see it continue to appear on the newsstands. So I hereby give the editor a friendly warning: don't buy "Nor Custom Stale" if my agent should ever submit it to you.

I want to warn my agent, who sometimes reads the stuff I send him to peddle, not to submit "Nor Custom Stale" to a friendly editor.

"Nor Custom Stale" is a story I have sold four times in the last several years. Each organization that bought it went out of business before the story got into print. It has never been published.

It's like the perennial bridesmaid who always goes home alone after the wedding.

Perhaps it's just as well it hasn't appeared in print, considering what happened to me last night. I'm still a little shaky from the experience, but I want to get it on paper while it's fresh. In the hope that it may save some nice person or persons from going broke.

About last night: I was at my desk, staring at a sheet of paper that wouldn't fill itself with salable words. My wife and the two cats were out in the living room, discussing grasshoppers.

I decided to give up the nebulous idea I'd had for a story, and join the discussion in the other part of the house. I opened a fresh pack of cigarets — Camels, in the event the Reynolds people want to send me a case — and out of the corner of my eye I saw something on the couch.

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It was Mr. Pit. With one *t*. I know it's corny, and told him so.

"It's not the humidity," he explained. "It's the heat. It's hard to be clever in high temperature."

"Well," I said, "I never expected to meet you in the — is it flesh? — but I'll try not to flip any lids. You're not here by chance, I presume?"

"Not by chance."

"Then, sir, if I'm not over-stepping the bounds of anything, may I ask you just why in hell — no pun intended — you are here?"

"For some reason, that reminds me of Edgar Allan Poe," he murmured. "No, you're not overstepping any bounds. I'm here in connection with nor custom stale."

Hearing it like that, it was baffle-gab. I must have looked blanker than my recalcitrant — love that word! — sheet of paper.

He went on: "Your story." He capitalized it: "'Nor Custom Stale.'"

I felt a chill of fear. The shock of his appearance — the fact of his *existence* — was beginning to pump against my heart.

"It's the atom bomb story all over again," I said.

He looked vague, like a bank teller when the examiner tells him he's short $1453.

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," Mr. Pit said.

Back in 1943, I told him, I wrote a story about how to make and control an atomic bomb. Military Intelligence and the FBI wanted to know where I got my information, when the story was published nearly two years before Hiroshima. They thought that maybe there had been a leak from the Manhattan Project.

I had been scared, then, though innocent. But the guys who questioned me had been at least 100% human. My fright now had a somewhat different texture.

Mr. Pit thought for a moment. "Yes," he said, "there is a parallel. We think there might have been a leak. We want to run it down."

"No leak," I said. "I just brought it up out of my sub-ego, uh, my alter-conscious — damn it, Mr. Pit, you've got me babbling. I'm not really afraid of you, I don't think. It's just that I never believed that you — nor all of the other things your existence implies — were real. I don't believe it now. Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe I'm drunk, though I haven't had a drink in a long time. I'll fix that. Soon."

"I'm not here to harm you," he said in soothing tones. "What kind of public relations would that be? I'm simply trying to find the truth."

I relaxed a bit. "I have nothing to hide. And if I have, you'll probably get it out of me some way or another. Read any good minds lately? But I want to know something before we go any farther into this. What if I won't cooperate? What happens?"

"I am empowered to take steps," he said.

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"Empowered? By whom?"

"Do you want chapter and paragraph number?" he asked in a tone of voice.

"I'll take your word," I said hastily. "What do you want to know?"

"First, where did you get the idea for 'Nor Custom Stale'?"

I shrugged. I lit a Camel. "Where does anybody get ideas? That was years ago. I don't even remember the story very well, much less where I got the idea."

He pondered. "I'm afraid," he said slowly, "that isn't satisfactory."

"Well, I'll try to think." I recollected that tone of voice I mentioned, and I really tried to think. I took my carbon copy of the story out of the file and skimmed it.

"This seems to be fairly standard stuff," I said. "Movie star sells her soul for youthful beauty as long as she lives. She's supposed to grow older in a certain film, but the make-up men can't age her looks. Problem, make her look older."

He made an impatient gesture. "Not the plot. Details."

"Don't push me around," I said, suddenly full up. "How the hell would I know where I got the details? They just grew. Ever hear of Topsy?"

"I know her well," he said. "Don't lose your temper. The details I'm referring to are not commonly available to human beings. I want to know who leaked the information. Was it Hathor?"

"I don't know any Arthur."

"No. Hathor. I don't know what you called him in the story, but he's a musical demon with three heads. He plays clarinet, oboe, and C-Melody sax at the same time."

The chill went deep this time. "Now, wait. It's true that I had a character like him in the yarn, but he was just a figment of my ah — ah —" I broke off, remembering something.

What I remembered was a telephone call. I don't remember whom I was calling, or why. Maybe I was trying to borrow money, or asking the public librarian for the birthdate of Henri Cassel. At any rate, something went wrong with the call and my open phone was plugged in on a conversation.

A voice said: " . . . three heads."

Another voice said: "I know, but . . . "

I got my idea for Mr. Woodwind Trio from that fragment. I told Mr. Pit about it.

"But you didn't hang up at that point," he said. "You eavesdropped."

"Nuts."

"You may not remember, but you listened. You learned the secret of staying young in looks. You'll stay as young-looking as you are till you die."

"I'm forty-two," I said. "I don't try to hide my age."

"Then you are old enough to remember early talking pictures — even silents. This telephone conver-

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sation you overheard — I believe you were living in Hollywood at the time?"

I was. I said so.

"Look back on your earliest screen enthusiasms. How many of the stars you then worshiped are *still* playing romantic leads in movies?"

"You mean I listened in on — ?" I thought of two female lovelies and one hairychest who don't look a day older today than when I watched them as a kid. And had one of those voices maybe sounded a little like . . . ? "Ulp," I said.

He ignored this comment. "I can now make a satisfactory report. I want to impress a point on you, though."

He got to his feet. "Four magazines have purchased 'Nor Custom Stale.' Each failed, in turn, shortly after buying the story. In each instance, you repurchased the rights to the story and resold it. Four times. Surely you can see my point?"

"You mean your mob — organization, whatever — won't let that story get into print?"

"Exactly."

"But why?"

"Because the formula is there. Youthful appearance all one's life. Consciously or not, you tried to put that information into circulation. But such knowledge must not — *must not* — be acquired again in the haphazard, carefree, price-free manner in which you acquired it." His voice was stern.

"And are you prepared," I asked, "to pay for suppressing the yarn?"

"You've been paid," he said.

Suddenly, he wasn't there any more.

That's almost all of it. At this point, I want to advise the editor of the recently defunct magazine that last purchased "Nor Custom Stale" that I don't want to buy it back. It can rot in his ice box for all of me.

After Mr. Pit had gone, I went out into the living room. The cats had tentatively agreed that the house was out of bounds for dead mice, as well as grasshoppers.

"I must have dozed off," I said.

"Oh, you it looks fine," my wife said.

"Thank you. I'll take you out and buy you a drink for that, if the cats will be all right by themselves."

The cats said they'd manage, so we drove around looking for a bar with two empty stools. We found one and ordered ryeballs.

The bartender raised his eyebrows at my wife, who is six years younger than I.

"I can serve you, lady. But is this young man twenty-one yet?"

A few notes on the non-fiction element of the story you've just read:

The story here thinly disguised as Nor Custom Stale *has had exactly the history described;*

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Providentially (perhaps through the intervention of St. Thomas More, patron of science-fantasy writers), F&SF rejected the story, not once but three times — a fact to which we undoubtedly owe our continued existence;

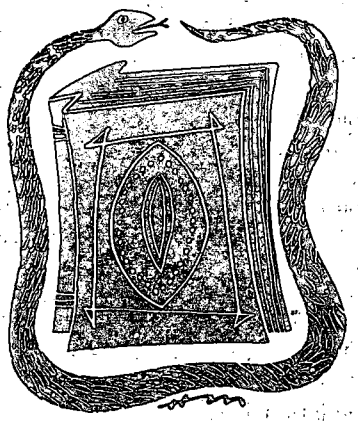
Cartmill was investigated by the FBI for apparent betrayal of Manhattan Project secrets in the story Deadline (Astounding, *March, 1944);*

I have known Cartmill for almost twenty years, and throughout those two decades bartenders have been skeptical as to his being of age.

Now for the unexpected sequel:

After Cartmill wrote this account and sold it to us, a magazine already thought dead pulled itself together and with its dying gasp published *the Cartmill story whose title is not quite* Nor Custom Stale. *This valiant gesture did not save the magazine from its fate; but now the forbidden story has appeared in print . . . and what steps is Mr. Pit taking to control those who read it?*

A. B.



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When this issue appears, the World Series will be almost upon us — and I'd hate to be forced (writing this in late July) to extrapolate what teams will be playing. The Dodgers almost certainly; but that four-way American League battle is nothing for sane extrapolators. (Personally I like the Red Sox, largely out of fellow-alumnus fan-feeling for Jensen; science fiction fandom should be rooting for the Indians because of the Cleveland Convention . . . and it'll probably be the Yankees.) But imagine the woes of sports predictors when we reach the days of the Galactic Series, which will take, we are informed on a conservative mathematical estimate, a good five centuries to reach its final game! To celebrate the season of our more mundane Series, the Messrs. Anderson and Dickson bring us one of the crucial games in the Galactic: the mighty struggle for the Sector pennant between the wily Sarenn Snakes and the ever unpredictable Toka Teddies, in which the Hokas of Toka once more teach Alex Jones that there is no possible end to the problems of an interstellar plenipotentiary.

Joy in Mudville

by POUL ANDERSON AND GORDON R. DICKSON

"Pla-a-a-ay *ball!*"

The long cry echoed through the park as Alexander Jones, plenipotentiary of the Interbeing League to the planet Toka, came through the bleacher entrance. Out on the field the pitcher wound up in a furry whirl of arms and legs and let go. Somehow the batter managed to shift his toothpick, grip the bat, and make ready while the ball was streaking at him. There was a clean crisp *smack* and the ball disappeared. The batter selected a fresh toothpick, stuck it in his mouth, jammed his hands in his pockets, and started a leisurely stroll around the diamond.

Alexander Jones was not watching this. He had heard the crack of the bat and seen the ball vanish; but following that there had been only a vague impression of something that roared by him and smashed into the bench above in a shower of splinters. As a former Interstellar Survey man, Alex was *ex officio* a reservist in the Solar Guard, and the promptness and decisiveness with which he hit

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the dirt now would have brought tears of fond pride to the eyes of his superior officers had they been there to see it.

However, they were not, and after holding his position for several seconds, Alex lifted a cautious head. Nobody else was up to bat; it looked safe to rise. He dusted himself off while glancing over the field.

It was spotted with small round forms, tubby, golden-furred, ursine-faced, the Hoka natives of the planet Toka. They were all in uniform, the outfit of long red underwear, short-sleeved shirts, loose abbreviated trousers, and peaked caps which had been traditional for baseball since it was invented back on Earth. Even if most of the races throughout the known Galaxy which now played the game were not even remotely human, they all wore some variation of the costume. Alexander Jones often wondered if his kind might not, in the long run, go down in history less as the originators of space travel and the present leaders of the Interbeing League than as the creators of baseball.

Mighty Casey, the planet's star batter, had completed his home run — or home saunter — and returned to the benches. Lefty was warming up before he tried himself against The Babe. Professor, the intellectual outfield, was at his post, keeping one eye on the diamond while the other studied a biography of the legendary George Herman Ruth. Beyond the bleachers, the high tile roofs of Mixumaxu lifted into a sunny sky. The Teddies were practicing, the day was warm, the lark on the wing, the snail on the thorn.

Putzy, the manager of the team, trotted worriedly up to Alex. He had been called something like Wishtu before the craze reached his planet; but the Hokas, perhaps the most adaptable race in the universe, the most enthusiastic innovators, had taken over names, language — everything! — from their human idols. Though of course they tended to be too literal-minded . . .

"Ya all right?" he demanded. He had carefully cultivated hoarseness into his squeaky voice. "Ya didn't get a concussion or nuttin'?"

"I don't think so," answered Alex a little shakily. "What happened?"

"Ah, it wuz just mighty Casey," said Putzy. "We allus try a new pitcher out on him. Shows him he's gotta woik when he's up wit' duh Teddies."

"Er — yes," said Alex, mopping his brow. "He isn't going to hit any more this way, is he?"

"He knocks dat kind every time," said Putzy with pardonable smugness.

"*Every* time?" retorted Alex maliciously. "Did you ever hear the original poem of 'Casey At the Bat'?"

Putzy leaped forward, clapped a furry hand to Alex's mouth, and warned in a shaking whisper: "Don't never say dat! Geez, boss, ya don't know what duh sound of dat pome does to Casey. He ain't never got over dat day in Mudville!"

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Alex winced. He might have known it. The Hoka mind was about as *sui generis* as a mind can get: quick, intelligent, eager, but so imaginative that it could hardly distinguish between fact and fiction and rarely bothered. Remembering other facets of Hoka-assimilated Earth culture — the Wild West, the Space Patrol, Sherlock Holmes, the Spanish Main, *la Légion Étrangère* — Alex might have known that the one who had adopted the role of mighty Casey would get so hypnotized by it as to start believing the ballad had happened to him personally.

"Never mind," he said. "I came over to get you. The Sarennians just arrived at the spaceport and their manager's due at my office in half an hour. I want you there to meet him."

"Okay," said Putzy, sticking an enormous cigar into his mouth. Alex shuddered as he lit up; tobacco grown on Toka gets strong enough to walk. They strolled out together, the pudgy little Hoka barely reaching the waist of the lean young human. Alex's runabout was waiting; it swung them above the walled city toward the flashy new skyscraper of the League Mission.

Seen from above, the town was a curious blend of the ancient and the ultramodern. As a technologically backward race, the Hokas were supposed to be introduced gradually to Galactic civilization; until they had developed so far, they were to be gently guarded from harming themselves or being harmed by any of the more advanced peoples. Alex, as League plenipotentiary, had the job of guide and guardian. It paid well and was quite a distinction; but he sometimes wondered if it wasn't making him old before his time. If the Hokas were just a little less individualistic and unpredictable —

The runabout set itself down on a landing flange of the skyscraper and Alex led the way inside. Ella, his native secretary, nodded at him from an electrowriter. There was a cigaret in her lipsticked mouth, but the effect of her tight blouse was somewhat spoiled for him by the fact that Hokas have twice the lactational equipment of humans. She was competent, but her last job had been with Mixumaxu's leading Private Eye.

Entering the inner office with Putzy, Alex flopped into a chair and put his feet on the desk. "Sit down," he invited. "Now look, before the Sarennian manager comes, I want to have a serious talk with you. It's about financing the team."

"We're doing okay," said Putzy, chewing on his cigar.

"Yes," said Alex grimly. "I know all about that. Your arrangement with these self-appointed outlaws in the so-called Sherwood Forest."

"It's fair enough," said Putzy. "Dey all get free passes."

"Nevertheless," said Alex after gulping for air, "things have got to be put on a more regular basis. Earth Headquarters likes the idea of

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you . . . people playing ball, it's a good way to get you accustomed to meeting other races, but *I'm* responsible for your accounts. Now I have a plan which is a little irregular, but I do have discretionary powers." He reached for some papers. "As you know, there are valuable uranium deposits on this planet which are being held in trust for your people; they're being robot-mined, and the proceeds have been going into the general planetary development fund. But there are enough other sources of income for that, so I've decided to divert the uranium mines to the Teddies' use. That will give you an income out of which to pay for necessities" — He paused and frowned. "— and that does *not* include toothpicks for Casey!"

"But he's gotta have toot'picks!" cried the manager, shocked. "How kin he waggle a toot'pick with'out —"

"He can buy his own," said Alex sternly. "Salaries are paid to the team, you know. The same goes for that bookworm outfielder of yours, Professor — let him pay for his own books if he must read while he plays."

"Okay, okay. But we gotta have a likker fund. Duh boys gotta have deir snort."

Alex gave in on that. The fieriness of the Hoka distillation and the capacity of its creators were a Galactic legend. "All right. Sign here, Putzy. Under the law, native property has to be in native hands, so this gives you title to those mines, with the right to receive income from them and dispose of it as you see fit. Sometime next week I'll show you how to keep books."

The manager scrawled his name as Ella stuck her head in the door. She never would use the office annunciator. "A monster to see you, chief," she said in a loud whisper.

"Ask him to wait a minute, will you?" said Alex. He turned to Putzy. "Now look, please be as polite as you can when the Sarennian comes in. I don't want any trouble."

"What's duh lowdown on dem, anyway?" inquired Putzy. "All I know is we play 'em here next mont' for duh Sector pennant."

"They — well, I don't know." Alex coughed. "Just between us, I don't like them much. It isn't their appearance, of course; I've been friends with weirder beings than they are. It's something in their culture, something ruthless. . . . They're highly civilized, full members of the League and so on, but it's all that the rest of the planets can do to restrain their expansionism. By hook or by crook, they want to take over the leadership." He brightened. "Oh, well, we're only going to play ball with them."

"*Only?*" cried Putzy, aghast. "What's so only about it? Man, dis is for duh Sector pennant. Dis ain't no bush-league braggle. Dis is a crooshul serious!"

Alex shrugged. "All right, so it

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is." But he could sympathize with his charges. The Hokas had come far and fast in a mere ten years. It would mean a lot to them to win Sector championship.

The Galactic Series necessarily operated under some rather special rules. In a civilization embracing thousands of stars and still expanding, one year just wasn't enough to settle a tournament. The Series had been going on for more than two centuries now. On the planets local teams contended in the sub-series for regional championships; regions fought it out for continental victories, and continents settled the planetary supremacy. Then there were whole systems, and series between systems, all going on simultaneously . . . Alex's brain reeled at the thought.

Extrapolating present expansion of the League frontiers, sociologists estimated that the play-off for the Galactic Pennant would occur in about 500 years. It looked very much as if the Toka Teddies might be in the running then. In one short decade, their energy and enthusiasm had made them ready to play Sarenn for the Sector pennant. The sector embraced a good thousand stars, but Toka had by-passed most of these by defeating previously established multistellar champions.

"If we lose," said Putzy gloomily, "back to duh bush leagues for anudder ten-twen'y years, and mebbe we'll never get a chanst at duh big game." He cheered up. "Ah, who's worrying? Casey ain't been struck out yet, and Lefty got a coive pitch dat's outta dis univoise."

Alex pressed a button and spoke into the annunciator. "Send the gentlebeing in, Ella." He rose politely; after all, Ush Karuza, manager of the Sarenn Snakes, *was* a sort of ambassador.

The monster squished in. He stood well over two meters high, on long, clawed legs; half a dozen ropy tentacles ending in strong boneless fingers circled his darkly gleaming body under the ridged, blubbery-faced head. Bulging eyes regarded Alex with a cold, speculated stare, but he bowed courteously enough. "Your sservant, *ssir*," he murmured in tolerably good English.

"Welcome . . . ah . . . Mr. Karuza," said Alex. "May I introduce Putzy Ballswatter, the manager of the Teddies? Won't you sit down?"

Putzy rose and the two beings nodded distantly at each other. Ush Karuza sniffed and unfolded a trapeze-like arrangement he was carrying. When he had draped himself over this, he lay waiting.

"Well," said Alex, swinging into the little speech he had prepared, "I'm sure you two will get along famously —"

Putzy, who had been staring at Ush Karuza, muttered something to himself.

"Did you say something, Putzy?" asked Alex.

"Nuts!" said Putzy.

"Hiss!" hissed the Sarennian.

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"Well, as I was saying," continued Alex hurriedly, "you'll get along famously as you ready yourselves for the big contest —"

Putzy seemed on the verge of speaking again.

"—in your *separate* training camps," went on Alex loudly, "at *good* distances from each other —" Under the rules, a team playing off its own world had to have a month's training on the other planet to accustom itself to the new conditions. There was also a handicapping system so complicated that no human brain could master it.

Alex knew what the trouble was this time. It was something he had kept carefully to himself since first learning that the Teddies were to play the Snakes. The fact was that the Sarrennians bore a slight but unfortunate resemblance to the Slissii, the reptile race which had been the Hokas' chief rival for control of Toka from time immemorial till men arrived to help out; and the fur on the little manager's neck had risen visibly at the mere sight of his opposite number.

What was worse, Ush Karuza seemed to be experiencing a like reaction toward Putzy. Even as Alex watched, the tentacled monster produced a small bottle which he opened and wafted gently before his nose like a disdainful dandy of the Louis Quinze period on Earth. For a second, Alex merely blinked, and then a whiff from the bottle reached his own nostrils. He gagged.

Putzy's sensitive nose was wrinkling too. Ush Karuza came as close to smirking as a being with fangs in its mouth could.

"Ah . . . merely a little butyl mercaptan, ssirss," he hissed. "Our atmosphere containss a ssimilar compound. It iss nessessary to our metabolissm. Quite harmless to man and Hoka."

"Um . . . ugh . . . ah?" said Alex brightly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Putzy grind out his dead cigar in the ashtray and dig another one twice the size out of his baggy uniform shirt. He fired it up. Butyl mercaptan sallied forth to meet and mingle with blue noisome clouds of smoke.

"Ah, sssso!" mumbled Karuza furiously and began to waft his bottle more energetically.

Puff! Puff! Puff! went Putzy.

"Gentlebeings, gentlebeings, please!" wheezed Alex, taking the heavy paperweight away from Putzy.

Venomously hissing, Ush Karuza was uncorking a second bottle while Putzy crammed more cigars into his mouth.

Things were off to a fine start.

Alexander Jones came staggering home to his official residence that night in a mood to be comforted by his beautiful blonde wife, Tanni. But the house was empty, she having taken the children for a few days to the Hoka Bermuda for its annual sack by pirates (a notable social event on Toka), and dinner was

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served by the Admirable Crichton with his usual nerve-wracking ostentation. It was only afterward, sitting alone in the study with a scotch and soda, that Alex's ganglia stopped vibrating.

The study was a comfortable book-lined room with a cheerful fire, and when he had slipped into a dressing gown and placed himself before the desk, Alex realized that privacy was just what he needed. He pressed the door-lock button, opened a secret drawer, and got out a sheaf of papers.

Let not the finger of scorn be pointed at Alexander Jones. The most amiable, conscientious, thoroughly normal young men still have their hidden vices; perhaps these outlets are what keep them on their orbits, and surely Alex had more troubles than most who shoulder the Earthman's burden. What the universe needs is more candor, more tolerance and understanding of human weakness. The truth is that Alexander Jones was a poet.

Like most great creative artists, he was frustrated by the paradoxes of public taste. As a Solar Guardsman, he had achieved immortality by his poetic gifts. It was he who had originated the limerick about the spaceman and girl in free fall, as well as the Ballad of the Transparent Spacesuits, and these shall live forever. Yet they were merely the sparks of his careless youth and he now winced to recall them. His spirit was with the Avantist Revival; his idols had never been known outside of a select clique: Rimbaud, Baudelaire, cummings, Eliot, Cogswell. From time to time the interstellar mails carried manuscripts signed J. Alexander to the offices of *microcosm: the minuscule magazine*. So far, they had also carried the manuscripts back. But a shoulderer of the Earthman's burden is not easily discouraged.

Alex took a long drink, placed stylus to paper, and began writing:

the circumambient snake surrounds the palpitating tarry fever-dream of uncertain distortions and Siva screams and mutters unheard vacillations: now? then?
Perhaps later, it is hot today. —

The visio set interrupted him with a buzz. He swore and pressed the *Accept* button. The features of a rather woozy-looking Hoka appeared on the screen.

"Hi-yah, bosh," said the apparition.

"Putzy!" cried Alex. "You're drunk!"

"I am not," Putzy replied indignantly, momentarily reeling out of screen range. "Shober as a judge," he said, reappearing. "Coupla liters ish all I had. Wouldn't make a pup drunk. It's dis yer stuff Ush Karuza smokes when he's shelebratin'. Dese Sarennians don' drink. Dey just smokes uh stuff. Makes me kinda light-headed — smellin' it —" Putzy went over backwards.

Climbing back into view, he said

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with heavy gravity: "I called y'up t' tell ya shumfin. You said be nice to Karuza, di'n' ya?"

"Yes," said Alex, a dreadful premonition seizing him.

"Thash what I thought ya said. Well, listen. Like yuh said, we wen' out for li'l drink. Had li'l talk, like yuh said we should. We got t' talkin' shop, shee, an' I tol' him 'bout dose uranium mine rights. Right away he wan'ed ta bet me some salt mines on Sarenn against 'em. So I did."

"You did?" yelped Alex.

"Sure I did. Signed duh papers an' all. Di'n' ya say be nice to him? But listen —" Putzy beckoned mysteriously and Alex leaned forward, shaking. Putzy went on in a whisper. "Here's duh t'ing. Not on'y has I made him happy, but we got us some salt mines."

"How come?" moaned Alex.

"Because!" said Putzy strongly, driving his point home with a stubby finger jabbed into the screen before him. "Because he don' know it yet, but duh Teddies is gonna win."

"Is that so?" barked Alex.

"Sure, an' yuh know why?"

Alex shook his head numbly. "No, why?"

"Because," said Putzy triumphantly, "duh Snakes is gonna lose."

He beamed. "Jush t'ought ya'd like to know, bosh. So long."

"Hey!" screamed Alex. "Come back here!"

He was too late. The screen was blank.

"Oh, *no!*" he gasped. "Not this!"

For a wild instant, his only thought was of *quotation at the waterfront*. It had been shaping up so nicely! Wouldn't he ever get a chance to write something really significant?

Then he settled back to realities and wished he hadn't.

Tottering to his office the next morning after a sleepless night, he took an athetrine tablet and called the Mission library to send up Volume GAK-GAR of *Basic Interstellar Law*. When he received it, he turned to the section on gambling between beings from different planets. He had to find out if the bet Putzy had made with Karuza could be legally collected or not. The legislation in question turned out to be full of such witty statements as, "The above shall apply in all cases covered by Smith *vs.* Xptui except in such cases as are covered by Sections XCI through CXXIII inclusive" — each of these with its own quota of exceptions and references. After two hours, he was still no closer to an answer.

He sighed, sent Ella out for more coffee, and was just settling down to a fresh assault on the problem when there was a sort of swirl in the air before him and a semi-humanoid specimen with an enormous bald head topping a spindly little body materialized in his visitors' chair.

"Greetings, youth!" boomed the newcomer. "My visualization of the cosmic all implies that you are surprised. Do not be so. Be advised

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that I am Nicor of Rishana, who is to umpire the forthcoming contest between Toka and Sarenn."

Alex recovered from his astonishment. The Rishanans, the most intellectual race in the known Galaxy, were almost legends. They could be lured from their home only by a problem impossible for lesser races to solve. Such was any game governed by the 27 huge volumes of the Interstellar Baseball Association rules; as a result, Rishanans invariably officiated in the Series as umpires.

Otherwise they ignored the rest of the Galaxy and were ignored by it. Undoubtedly they had a lot on the ball — for instance, whatever tiny machine or inborn psionic ability permitted them to project themselves through space at will; but since nobody really misses the brains he doesn't have, the rest of the League had never fallen prey to any sort of inferiority complex. Indeed, most beings felt rather sorry for the poor dwarfs. Since the Rishanans felt rather sorry for the poor morons, everybody was happy.

Inspiration came to Alex. "May I ask you a question, sir?" he begged.

"Of course you may ask a question," snapped Nicor. "Any ego may ask a question. What you really wish to know is whether I will answer the question." He paused and looked uncertain. "Or have you already asked me the question? Time is a variable, you know."

"No, I didn't know," said Alex politely.

"Yes, indeed," thundered the voice of that incredible ancient being. "As determined by Sonrak's hypothesis. But come, come, youth — the question."

"Oh, er, yes." Alex pointed to the law book. "I'm having a little trouble with a small point here. Just a — heh! heh! — a theoretical question, you know, sir. If a Hokā bet a Sarennian some Tokan land, and lost, could the — er — say the Sarennian collect?"

"Certainly," snapped Nicor. "That is, he would collect by respective substitute."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You need not apologize for inferior mentality. In effect, the Hokas, being wards of the League, would be protected; but as plenipotentiary and responsible individual, *you* would have to pay the winner an equivalent amount."

"What?" cried Alex as the assessed valuation of the uranium mines — a fourteen-digit figure — reeled before him.

He heard the explanation through a blur. The extreme libertarians who had drawn up the League Constitution had protected ordinary citizens right and left but deliberately placed high officials on a limb. In this case, a judgment in equity would send him to the Sarennian salt mines for — oh, in view of the new longevity techniques, about fifty years, turning his wages over to Ush Karuza. The working conditions were not too bad unless one

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happened to have a distaste for the odor of the mercaptans.

— "Well, well, enough of this pleasant but unprofitable chit-chat, youth," finished Nicor. "Let us be off to the ball game."

"What game?" asked Alex weakly. "The pennant game isn't for another month."

"Tut-tut," reproved Nicor. "Don't interrupt. I am, of course, both forgiving and gracious. Perhaps you think an intellectual like myself has no sense of humor. So many beings fall into the misapprehension. Certainly I have a sense of humor. Of course, it is more subtle than yours; and naturally I am not amused by the crude horseplay of lesser intelligences. In fact," went on Nicor, his brow darkening, "that is the main trouble with beings of small development. They do not take the cosmic all seriously enough. No dignity, youth, no dignity."

"But wait a minute —" broke in Alex.

"Don't interrupt! As an intelligence of the quaternary class, you cannot possibly make an interruption of sufficient importance to interfere with a statement emanating from an intelligence of my class. As I was saying . . . Dignity. Dignity! That is what is so painfully lacking in the younger races." A thundercloud gathered on his face. "When I think of the presumption of those few rash individuals who have dared to question my — MY! — decisions upon the baseball field — But I am sure your charges will be guilty of no such indiscretion."

Alex rocked in his chair. If there was any sport the Hokas loved with a pure and undying love, it was umpire-baiting.

"As for your quaint belief that this is not the day of the game," continued Nicor, "I could hardly expect you to know. You irresponsible children never know. When I was your age, I used to have to get up every morning and figure time as a variable to fourteen decimal places before I could start my day's calculations. We didn't have Sonraks in those days to help us. The trouble with you present youths is that you have it too easy. Surely you do not think I would put myself in the ridiculous position of having to realign myself for thirty days in the future? Naturally, I devoted only one point eight percent of my reasoning power to this business of establishing my spatio-temporal coordinates, but it is inconceivable that I should fail. No, no, rest assured that this is the day of the game."

Alex pointed a mute finger at the chronopiece on the wall. Nicor whirled and stared at it.

"*What?*" he roared with a volume that shook the office. "Am I to be given the lie by a mechanical? Am I to be outfaced by a planet? Am I to be maladjusted by a cosmic integral of the square root of minus one over log log tangent X, theta R squared over N, dx, from zero to infinity?

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Blast Sonrak! Damn the misplaced decimal point! Time is *not* a variable!"

And with an explosion that rocked the room, he vanished.

Now, it seemed, everything depended on the Teddies winning the game. Alex visited the Hoka ball park and tried to make Putzy institute more rigorous training. The Hokan idea of practice was to let Casey swat a few wild ones while the basemen and fielders sat down, puffing cigars, tilting jugs to their lips, and chatting lightly of this and that. To Alex's protests that the Snakes were bound to get some hits when they came up to bat, Putzy retorted that Lefty would fan them or, failing that, fielders with the speed of the Professor would easily tag them out. Alex gave up.

He made an excuse to drop in on the Sarennian training camp. The visitors were good, no denying that: their main advantage was their terrific tentacle spread, handy for nabbing flying balls; and when the pitcher was winding up, you couldn't see what kind of pitch was coming among all those arms, or even what arm it was coming from. But they lacked the Hoka swiftness and hitting power. Alex — who had spent long hours under a hypnoteacher cramming himself with baseball lore — decided that one set of advantages just about offset the other, so that there would be no handicapping.

Ush Karuza looked positively gloating under his superficial good manners, and Alex began to get suspicious. Considering the ambitions of Sarenn, there was probably more at stake than the pennant and a bet. Returning to his office, the man consulted the Service roster and found that a Sarennian was now at the top of the list of those waiting for ambassadorial vacancies and, if Toka's plenipotentiary were removed, would probably get the job. Sarenn being fairly close to the Tokan sun while Earth was far away, it wouldn't take long for the new chief to gain complete control of the planet for his people without attracting too much attention at Headquarters.

And a plenipotentiary sent to the salt mines would naturally not retain his position.

Alex looked hollowly into space. He didn't even have Tanni to comfort him; she had messaged an intention to stay on a while in Bermuda and he agreed, not wishing to torment her with worry which might turn out to be needless. His carefully guided planet was headed for tyrannous foreign rule; he was headed for the same; *microcosm* had just returned *Greeks En Brochette*. . . .

There is an old saying that, "The optimist declares this is the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist is afraid he's right." Alex agreed.

The big day dawned bright and clear and hot. Since early morning, a colorful throng of Hokas had been

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flocking into the ball park. They had come not only from Mixumaxu and its neighboring-city-states, but reflected the varied impact of human culture on their entire planet. A booted and spurred cowboy sat next to a top-hatted Victorian gentleman; a knight in armor clanked past a tubby Space Patrolman; a sashed character with a skull and crossbones on his cocked hat grumbled saltily, "Scupper my mizzenmast!" as he tripped on his cutlass. One part of the stands was reserved for Sarennian spectators, a silent and impassive mass of tentacles.

As Alex walked across the field to his official seat in the Hoka dugout, he scowled. The substitutes were all present and accounted for, but where was the regular team?

"Hot dogs, pop cawn, soda pop!" bawled a vendor in the stands above. "Getcha pop here, folks. Can't kill duh umpire wit'out a pop bottle!"

Alex's worried eyes traveled across the dusty ground to the center of the infield. Nicor of Rishana was already there, leaning on the bookcase containing the 27 volumes of rules. There was a grim look on his face which might have been caused by thoughts of Sonrak, and a slightly withdrawn expression in his eyes as he mentally scanned the field from all necessary points of view This psionic ability had enabled the number of umpires to be reduced to one, even as the easy exhaustion of some races had forced changes in the rules governing substitutions.

"Where's our team?" muttered Alex. "They're late already."

The buzz from the bleachers became a chant. "We want the Teddies. We want the Teddies. We want the Teddies."

Then there was a ragged cheer as the famous nine came into sight — not from the locker room, but from the main gate. Even at that distance, Alex saw how they staggered. Leading the way was Ush Karuza, looking smug and supporting Putzy, who was singing something about somebody called Adeline. Alex broke into a cold sweat.

Putzy lurched up to him while the rest of the team was calling cheery greetings to their friends in the stands and forcing autographed balls on them. "Hi-ya," burbled the Hoka manager, collapsing into Alex's arms. "I gotta tell ya shumfin. We got dese Sarennians all wrong. Good ol' Ush, he's all right. Ya know what he done? He took us all out dis mornin' an' stood us to duh bigges' dinner in town. All duh steak an' French fries we could eat. Whoops!" He lost his grip and sat down suddenly. "T'ink I'll take li'l nap." His beady eyes closed.

Alex glared at the Snake manager. "Is this your idea of fair play?" he asked. "Drugging our team. Umpire!"

Nicor flickered in mid-air and appeared beside them. "What is it, youth?"

"This —" Alex pointed shakily at Ush Karuza. "This *gentlebeing* took

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our men out and drugged them with that stuff he smokes."

"My dear ssir!" protested the monster. "It iss merely a mild sstimulant that we Ssarennianss ssmoke for pleasure. I am not accountable if it affectss our little friendss."

Alex opened his mouth indignantly. "Down, youth!" snapped Nicor. "There is nothing in the rules covering pre-game festivities." He returned to midfield.

Another Sarennian pushed forward a great wheeled tank. "Ice cream," announced Ush Karuza grandly. "Help yourselfss, my friendss!" As the Hokas threw themselves on it with besotted cries of glee, he pulled a book out of his pouch and gave it to the Professor. "And for you," he added, "a brand-new biography of Tyruss Cobb, sspecially prepared by the Ssarennian Sstate Department."

"Oh, boy!" The small, bespectacled Hoka sat down and began reading it at once. Ush Karuza oozed off with every appearance of satisfaction. Alex buried his face in his hands.

Nicor of Rishana spoke into his wrist microphone, and his voice boomed over the park: "Come, youths! My visualization demands that you now play ball!"

The spectators cheered. The band, somewhat confused, broke into *Auld Lang Syne*. The Toka Teddies wobbled out onto the field. Putzy sat up and muttered something about not feeling so good.

The Snakes, as visitors, were first up to bat. Their star hitter, Shimpur Sumis, wrapped his tentacles around his club and waved it gleefully. Lefty, the Teddy pitcher, found his way to the mound and began turning around to get his position. He kept on turning.

"Play ball, youth!" thundered the umpire. Shimpur Sumis yawned.

It seemed to infuriate Lefty. He sent his ball spinning in faster than Alex could follow. Either because he wasn't quite himself, or because he hadn't allowed for the greater reach of Sarennian tentacles, Shimpur Sumis connected with a solid hit. The ball smacked into left field. The monster dropped his bat and galumphed toward first base.

"Grab it, Professor!" screamed Alex.

The intellectual outfielder was too immersed in his new book to notice. The ball shot past him. His fans howled, "Wake up, ya bum! Grab dat ball!"

Shimpur Sumis rounded second.

A Hoka near Alex, clad in doublet and hose and feathered cap, leaped up, fitted an arrow to his longbow, and let fly. The Professor yelled as it pinked him, glared around, saw the ball, and loped after it. By a miracle, he got it back to the catcher just as Sumis went by third. The Sarennian retreated, grinning smugly.

The next one stepped up to bat. Lefty sent a whizzer past him. The ball smacked into the catcher's mitt.

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"Ball one!" cried Nicor.

"Whaddaya mean, ball one?" squeaked Lefty, spinning around in a rage. "Dat wuz a strike if I ever seen one."

"A strike," said Nicor, glowering, "must pass between waist and shoulders."

"Yeah, but he ain't got any waist *or* any shoulders," protested Lefty.

"Hmmm, yes, so I see." Nicor pulled one of the fat volumes out of the bookcase beside him and consulted it. Then he took forth a transit and sighted on the batter. The crowd rumbled impatiently.

"The equivalent median line," said Nicor at last, "yields the incontrovertible result that the missile so injudiciously aimed was, indeed, ball one."

Alex shuddered. Putzy turned green under his fur.

The next ball met a hard-swinging bat. Again it zoomed by the immersed Professor. Again the archer fired. This time the Professor was ready. He plucked the arrow out of the air as it neared him and continued reading. Both Sarennians loped home. Their rooters set up a football-style cheer:

Hiss, hiss, hiss!
Who iss better than thiss?
Squirmy worm, destiny's germ —
TEAM!!!

The next Sarennian went out on a pop fly just behind third. The one after that made it to first. But Lefty, even when pitching on hope and instinct, was not a hurler to be despised. The fifth Sarennian up to bat barely got a piece of the ball and both he and the Snake on base were put out in a wobbly double play.

The Teddies came to bat. They were uniformly ineffective with the single exception of mighty Casey, who, as Putzy was too sick to tell him not to, tried to fulfill a long-standing ambition to lay down a bunt, but only succeeded in bunting the ball over the left field fence. Score one run for the Teddies.

The next four innings were a rout. The regular Teddy team got even sicker and had to be taken out, and against the substitutes, the Sarennians made blissful scores. At the end of the first half of the fifth inning, the board read seven to one in favor of the Snakes.

By the second half of the fifth, the original team members were weak but recovered, and ready to take the field again with blood in their eyes. Casey was first up, and with a valiant return to his usual nonchalance, he put his hands in his pockets and sauntered toward the plate, a toothpick in his mouth and scorn in his eye. He whipped into his batting stance just as the Sarennian pitcher let go. There was a blur, a crack, and he was strolling off along the baseline, nodding graciously to his fans.

But for him it had been a poor and a weak hit. The Sarennian left fielder reached forth an interminable tentacle and nabbed it as it came

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smoking along the ground. He whirled and shot it back toward first base. Casey saw it coming and broke into a panting run. He thundered into first together with the ball.

"Out!" said Nicor, appearing at the bag.

"Out???" screamed Casey, skidding to a stop and coming back. "I wuz in dere ahead o' duh ball wit' enough time fer a nap."

"I say *out*," ruled Nicor. "Do not dispute with a superbrain — Time! Don't mention that word *time* to me!"

"Why, ya blind, bloody, concrete-skulled superbrain!"

Pop bottles began to fly from the stands, bursting to fragments in the air as the small robot-controlled anti-aircraft guns mounted on the right field fence went into action. Nicor ignored the bombardment and settled the discussion by flickering back into position behind the pitcher's mound.

The game continued. The Teddies were still a little weak and uncertain. The Hoka following Casey was caught out at shortstop and the next Hoka sent a high fly into right field where it was easily taken for the put out.

The Snakes came up to bat in the first half of the sixth inning. Lefty, turned white-hot with determination, retired the opposing side without gain by three straight strikeouts. The Hokas took over at the plate and the first six men up scored two men and loaded the bases. The score stood at seven to three with Casey yet to bat, and the Snakes called time out.

"What is the occasion, youth?" demanded Nicor of Ush Karuza.

The Sarennian smirked. "I find I musst invoke one of the handicapping ruless, ssir," he answered. "Article XLIII, Ssection 3, Paragraph 22-b. In effect, it iss that a certain gass iss nessessary to our player'ss metabolissm. It being a mercaptan, completely non-toxic in small dosess ass you know, we may ssimply releasse it without sslowing the game down by wearing masskss and handicapping the Hokass."

"There are psychosomatic effects," objected Nicor. "I refer to the nauseous stench involved."

"I do not believe the ruless ssay anything about such side issuess," answered Karuza smugly.

Nicor went back to the books. At last he nodded. "I fear you are right," he agreed sadly. "But in the name of sportsmanship —"

Ush Karuza turned purple with rage and swelled up alarmingly. "Ssssir! How dare you!" he hissed. "Article CCXXXII, Amendment Number 546, paragraph 3-a, explissitly sstatess that Ssarennianss are incapable of the conssept of Ssportssmanship and sspessifically exemptss them from obsserving it."

"Oh." Nicor looked crestfallen. He checked. "True," he said bitterly.

Alex felt ill already. This looked like the end.

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A great generator was wheeled into an upwind position on the field. It began to fume. Alex caught a whiff and felt his stomach rise in revolt. There could only be a few parts per million in the air, but it was enough!

"Oof!" groaned Putzy beside him. "Lemme outta here."

"You stay," said Alex desperately, grabbing him. "Play up, play up, and play the game!"

Nicor turned a delicate green. "My visualization of the cosmic all suggests I am going to be sick," he muttered.

Putzy opened a box of cigars and passed them around to his team. "Dis may help ya fer a little while," he said. "Now get in dere and fight!" Tears rose in his eyes. "Me aged grandmudder is sitting at home, boys, old and sick, laying dere amongst her roses and lavender waiting for yuh to bring home duh pennant. It'll kill duh sweet old lady if ya lose —"

"Ah, shaddap!" said his grandmother, leaning out of her place in the stands beside him and stuffing her knitting in his mouth.

Alex fumed away on his own cigaret, trying to drown the smell that curled around him. There must be *some* way to escape those salt mines!

With the mercaptan turning his stomach upside down on top of the effects of the drug, Casey still batted in the man on third on a sacrifice fly. The Hoka following him struck out. Retired, the Teddies lurched out onto the field and took another pasting. The score climbed against them — six Sarenn runs in the seventh, seven in the eighth, with the brief one-two-three interlude of the Teddies at bat hardly noticeable in the Snakes' slugging festival. When the Hokas came up again in the top of the eighth, they were trailing twenty to four.

Alex chewed his fingernails. There *must* be an answer to this! There must be some counterirritant, something which would get the Hokas back to the careless energy and childlike enthusiasm which served them so well. . . . Counter-agents! The idea flared in his head.

He snatched at the water boy's arm. "Bring us something to drink!" he commanded. The little ursinoid sped away, to return with a slopping bucket which Alex knew very well did not contain water.

"Time out!" he yelled. "The Hokas request time out."

"What for, youth?" asked Nicor faintly.

"They need alcohol to protect themselves against the effects of the Sarennian gas. It's okay by the rule books, I'm sure."

Nicor brightened a little. "It does protect?" he inquired. "Then, youth, you may bring me some too."

Ush Karuza jittered about in a rage while the Teddies gathered weakly around the bucket and dipped their noses into it. Even by Hoka standards, they got it down

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fast. Nicor scowled at his complimentary beaker, sipped, winced, and gasped. "*This* is necessary to them?" he cried. "I have seen halogen breathers, I have seen energy eaters, I have seen drinkers of molten lead, but here is the race that shall rule the sevagram!"

Casey lifted his dripping black snout. "Urp," he said. "Gotta toot'-pick?"

"Play ball!" hollered Ush Karuza wrathfully.

The Babe waved casually at Putzy. "We'll get 'em," he said confidently, and connected with the first pitch for a clean single to left. The professor came up with his book in one hand, stuck it under his arm just long enough to belt one out of the park, and walked home with his nose back in his book.

"Geez!" he muttered reverently. "Dat Cobb could sure play *ball!*"

Lefty stepped up to bat with an evil gleam in his eye. The Sarennian star pitcher launched a ferocious fast ball across the middle. Lefty let it go by. "Oooooof!" said the catcher.

"Strike one," said Nicor.

Time out to replace one catcher.

There was no second strike. Lefty bounced the next pitch off the right field wall for a stand-up triple.

Casey sneered and sauntered out to the plate. Grabbing the end of the Sarennian catcher's fourth tentacle, he began picking his teeth with it.

"Halt! Stop! Foul!" shrieked Karuza. "He *bit* my player!"

Some of Alex's hard-won baseball knowledge came to his aid. "Article XLI, Section 5, Paragraph 17-a: 'Players may take such nourishment as is required during the game,' " he flung back.

"But not off *my* players!" wailed Karuza.

Nicor weaved over to his books and consulted them. "I am afraid I can find nothing forbidding cannibalism," he announced. "It must never have occurred to the commission. Tsk, tsk."

The pitcher let fly. Casey set his bat end-on on the plate and jumped up to balance on top of it. "Strike one!" called Nicor.

"Nope," said Casey owlishly. "Yuh mean ball one, ump. Duh ball went under m' waist. Under m' feet, in fack!"

"So it did," agreed Nicor imperturbably. "Ball one!"

"The ruless —" sputtered Ush Karuza.

"Nothing in the rules against balancing on top of a bat, youth." Nicor scratched his bulging head. "I do believe the commission will have to call a special meeting after this game."

The Sarennian pitcher wound up again. As the ball zoomed toward him, Casey swung the mightiest swing in Toka's history. The Snakes' second baseman saw the ball screaming at him and dropped to the ground in terror. A bolder monster in the outfield raised his glove and caught it. Or perhaps one should

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say it caught him — he was lifted off the ground, described a beautiful arc, and landed three meters away. The ball went merrily on to cave in a section of the fence beyond.

Casey, who had been spinning on one heel unable to stop, came to a halt and staggered around the bases. He had plenty of time, because the Sarennians had to dig the ball out from between two planks.

Time out while the Snakes replaced one unconscious outfielder and one second baseman with a bad case of the shakes.

The rest of the Hokas followed the example of their star players and sailed twice completely through their lineup before being retired with a score of 19 to the Snakes' 20 at the end of the eighth. The crowd, including Alex, was going wild.

Shimpur Sumis came up to bat with a haughty look suggesting that he alone could settle the matter. Lefty, who was higher than a kite, threw him a ball so fast that it exploded on being struck. Nicor consulted his library for the rule on exploding balls, found none, and called it a strike . . . though he admitted that his visualization was not very complete today. Sumis' abused tentacles could not handle the bat well enough to keep him from being struck out.

Ush Karuza snarled and went over to the mercaptan generator and opened the valves wide. A thick, nearly visible stream of vapor rolled across the field to envelop the Hoka pitcher.

Lefty was too drunk to care. He sent off his famous curve. Then he gaped at it. So did the Snake batter. So did Alex. No — the ball couldn't possibly be where it was!

It landed in the catcher's mitt. "Strike one!" announced Nicor.

The next pitch was even more unbelievable than the last. It defied all known natural laws and went in a sine curve. "Strike two!"

The batter flailed wildly the third time. Alex distinctly saw the club go through the ball, but nothing happened.

"Strike three!" said Nicor. "Youth, you are now external to the n-dimensional sociological hypersphere!"

"Huh?" asked Putzy.

"He means, 'You're out,'" translated Alex happily.

"Foul!" bawled Ush Karuza. "They're using black magic."

"There is nothing in the rules against magic," said Nicor.

"I just t'row a damn good coive, dat's all," said Lefty belligerently.

The next Sarennian fared no better. By that time Alex had figured out the situation. "The thick stream of mercaptan vapor has a refractive index appreciably different from air," he told Putzy. "No wonder it produces optical illusions. Hoist by their own petard!"

Putzy seemed dubious. "If dat least means what I t'ink it means," he said, "you shouldn't oughtta say it in front of me grandmudder."

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The Teddies came to take their turn at bat. It was the last half of the ninth inning. The score stood at 19–20 with the Teddies trailing. The batting order at that moment stood: first The Babe, then the Professor, then Lefty, and then Casey. The Sarennians looked grim, but the Hokas in the stands, who had resorted to their potent pocket flasks while the team was getting their liquor from the water boy, were wildly jubilant. As The Babe picked up his bat and strode to the plate they began a cheer which finally died away to an awful silence as the whole crowd held its breath.

The Sarennian pitcher was clearly determined to let no hits be gotten off him. He wound up and let fly.

From the stands rose a mighty groan of horror, interspersed with shrill hoots of glee from the Sarennian section. For the stream of mercaptan vapor was still flowing past the pitcher *and all three balls wove a daisy chain past the plate!*

"Strike three!" cried Nicor. "Out!"

Sadly, The Babe came back. The stands were in an uproar. It looked as if open battle might break out between the Hoka and Sarennian fans. Alex cringed on his bench.

The Professor went up to the plate. The ball looped crazily by him. "Strike one!"

A long moan of agony went up from the Hokas.

"Strike two!"

The Professor braced himself. There was a wild, almost berserk gleam in his spectacles. The Sarennian pitcher writhed and twirled his tentacles with contemptuous confidence. The ball shot forward.

The Professor threw himself and his bat to meet it.

There was a tiny *tick*. The ball popped out of the vapor fog and trickled along the ground toward third base. There were only a few seconds of time before it was caught, but that was all the Professor's famous legs needed. There was a whiz, a blur, an explosion of dust, and the Hoka was safe at first.

The tying run was on, and there were two outs left to bring it home.

Lefty took his time selecting his bat. He swung it heavily a few times to test the balance and then slowly stalked up to the plate. The pitcher wound up. He threw. The stands groaned.

"*Strike one!*" thundered Nicor in a voice of doom.

The Sarennian catcher strolled out to return the ball to the pitcher. They conferred for a few seconds.

With the battery back in position, the pitcher wound up again. The ball snapped out of his mass of tentacles, flickered, and appeared in the catcher's mitt.

"*Strike two!*"

"Casey," said Putzy in a shaking tone, "get ready, boy."

Alex turned to look at the Teddies' mainstay. To his surprise, the little batter seemed cool and calm. "Relax, Putzy," Casey said. "It's

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in duh bag. All I gotta do is knock us bot' home."

"But dose pitches!" said Putzy.

"Lissen!" said Casey with some heat. "Lissen, ya don't t'ink I ever bodders to watch d' pitcher, do yuh? All I pays attention to is duh ball from duh time it gets to about two meters away from me. And duh ball gotta be straight den, or duh ump calls it a foul. Dey can't fool me none."

Slowly, hope began to dawn on Putzy's furry face. He was even smiling as Nicor called "Strike three!" and Lefty returned glumly from the plate.

Casey got to his feet and began his customary nonchalant stroll toward the batter's box. At first the crowd merely gaped at him in astonishment; but then, drawing courage from his apparent confidence, they raised a swelling cheer that rocked the stands. He doffed his cap and kissed his hand to the fans, waved, rubbed his hands in the dirt, and took up his stance. Alex saw, through a vision blurred by tenseness, that the Sarennian pitcher was already losing heart at sight of this overweening opponent.

"Time out!" screamed Ush Karuza.

For a moment the park was held in agonized silence. Then a mounting growl like that of a Boomeringian sea-bear disturbed at its meal commenced and grew.

"For what reason, youth?" asked [illegible]or.

"Article XXXVI, Ssection 8, Paragraph 19-k," said Ush Karuza defiantly. "Any manager may encourage hiss team by verbal meanss."

Nicor checked. "Correct," he said. "You may proceed."

There was a scurry from the Sarennian dugout and a public address system was wheeled onto the field and its microphone set up before a small tape player. As the stands waited silently to see what this new move might portend, Ush Karuza switched it on. There was a hissing noise as the machine warmed up.

At the plate, Casey smiled indulgently.

And then the hissing stopped and a voice boomed over the park. It was not a Sarennian voice, but human; and the first words it uttered wiped the smile from Casey's lips and fell on the field like the hand of doom. For the voice was reciting, and the first words were:

It looked extremely rocky for the Mudville nine that day:

The score stood two to four with but one inning left to play.

So when Cooney died at second . . .

"Oh, no!" wailed Putzy. "It's *it*!"

"What's it?" choked Alex.

"Dat pome — '*Casey At duh Bat*' — oooh, lookit poor Casey now —" The manager pointed a trembling finger at the Teddies' last hope, who was shaking with unbearable sobs as he stood at the plate.

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"I protest!" screamed Alex, leaping from the bench and running wildly out to where Nicor stood.

"You have no right to protest," snapped the umpire. "You are merely a spectator."

"Den I pertest!" roared Putzy, skidding to a halt beside Alex. "Turn dat t'ing off!"

At the plate, Casey was melting down in his own tears as the tape swung into the fifth stanza.

Then from the gladdened multitude
went up a joyous yell.
It rumbled in the mountaintops, it
rattled in the dell,
It struck upon the hillside and re-
bounded on the flat,
For Casey, mighty Casey, was ad-
vancing to the bat.

Casey was flat on the ground now, making feeble pawing motions as if he would dig his grave where he lay, crawl in, and die.

"Your protest is out of order," said Nicor.

Ush Karuza oozed oily sympathy. "I am afraid your batter iss not feeling well," he murmured.

. . . And when the writhing pitcher
ground his ball into his hip,
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a
sneer curled Casey's lip. . . .

Abandoning the umpire, Putzy ran to his collapsed star and tried to lift him from the ground. "Fer cripes-sake, Casey," he pleaded. "Stan' up. Just get us one little hit. Dat's all I ask."

"I can't," choked Casey. "Muh heart ain't in it no more. Dey trusted me in Mudville and I let 'em down."

The stillness over the park was broken only by his sobs and the inexorable recorded voice.

. . . Close by the sturdy batsman, the
ball unheeded sped.
"That ain't my style," said Casey.
"Strike one!" the umpire said. . . .

Like a drowning man, Alex saw his whole life parade by him: Tanni, the children, Earth, Toka. It was not what he wanted. He wanted some way out of this inferno.

No other batter had a chance, the Teddies were too demoralized. But what to do, what to do? Surely he, Alexander Jones, had some means of helping, some talent — He gnawed trembling fingers as the poem tolled its way to its dreadful conclusion.

. . . And now the air is shattered
with the force of Casey's blow!

Damn all poets!

Oh, somewhere in this favored land
the sun is shining bright,
The band is playing somewhere and
somewhere hearts are light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and
somewhere children shout,
But there is no joy in Mudville —

Poetry!

— MIGHTY CASEY HAS STRUCK OUT!

"Yipe!" said Alex.

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There was one other outstanding ability which Ensign Alexander Jones had shown in the Guard besides hitting the dirt. And that was that when the occasion arose, he was very quick off the mark when there was something to be run to, or from. Therefore, just as some weeks earlier the promptitude with which he nosedived would have pleased his superiors, so now they would have joyed to see the speed with which he covered the distance between the umpire's post and the public address system. Even the Professor would have been pushed to match his velocity; and the way he stiff-armed the lone Sarennian guarding the recorder was a privilege to observe.

He snatched up the microphone and panted into it. "Go on, boss!" yelled Putzy, unsure what his adored plenipotentiary intended but ready to back him up.

"Pant, pant, pant," boomed Alex over the field.

Ush Karuza ran to stop him. "Hold, youth!" ordered Nicor. "He has a right to use the machine."

"Pant, pant," panted Alex, and began to improvise:

"But hold (pant), what strikes the umpire, what causes him to glare
With fiery (pant, pant) look and awful eye upon the pitcher there?
And Casey takes the catcher by the collar with his hand;
He hales him to the (pant) umpire and together there they stand."

Beside the plate, the Hoka Casey lifted his head in wonder, and wiping the tears from his eyes, stared open-mouthed at Alex.

The human had had his dark suspicions about the way Lefty was struck out last time. No chance to prove that, but he could weave it into his revenge.

" 'I bid you look,' cried Casey, 'I bid you search him well.
For such as these our fine fair game they soon would sound its knell—!' "

Alex hesitated, looking a trifle confused. "Dat's my plenipotentiary who said dat!" cried Putzy's grandmother; and thus heartened, he proceeded.

"The umpire checks them over and the villains' faces fall
When out from each one's pocket he pulls forth A HIDDEN BALL!
" 'Oh, shame!' cries out the Mudville crowd. The echoes answer, 'Shame!'
'That such a dirty low-down trick should blight our Casey's name.
The pitcher only faked his throw, the catcher faked his catch.
The cowards knew that such as they were never Casey's match.' "

"You untentacled mammal!" raged Ush Karuza. "You sslimeless conformation of boned flesh!"

Alex had long ago discovered that mankind rarely reacts to insults couched in nonhuman terms. It did not offend him at all to be told that he was slimeless.

The Teddies' Casey was sitting up

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by the plate now and beaming. Alex took a deep breath and went on:

"'*Now take your places once again. Once more!' the umpire cried.*
'*And your next pitches will be fair or else I'll have your hide.*
Now take your places once again, to places one and all!'
And as soon as they were ready, the umpire cried, 'Play ball''"

The Hoka Casey was up on his feet and clutching his bat. His eyes were riveted on Alex. And as the last two stanzas came out, his little form hunched and twisted through the motions Alex described.

"*And now the pitcher takes his stance, his face is black and grim*
And he starts his furious windup with a fearful verve and vim.
And now he rocks back on his heel; and now he lets it fly.
The ball comes sizzling forward watched by Casey's steely eye.

"*For Casey does not tremble, mighty Casey does not balk,*
Though it's clear the ball is high and wide, and they aim to make him walk.
He steps forward in the batter's box, his bat's a lambent flame.
Crack! Smash! The ball flies o'er the fence—AND CASEY WINS THE GAME!"

The stands were going crazy. Hokas of all shapes, sizes, and descriptions came pouring down from their seats to mob and congratulate —

—Casey, of course.

Who else was responsible for the Mudville win?

To Hokan taste, it was almost an anticlimax after the glorious victory of the fictional Casey when the factual one playfully tapped a home run over the left field fence and won the Sector pennant.

In spite of custom, Alexander Jones did not preside over the wild festivities that night. He felt he deserved a quiet evening at home, alone with a tall drink and *quotation at the waterfront*. Tanni would be coming back soon, and much as he longed to see her, he knew she would give him no chance to produce something really significant — some poem reflecting the realities of Life.

SAREN	2	1	1	1	2	0	6	7	0	20
TOKA	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	15	2	21

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Dreamworld

by ISAAC ASIMOV

AT THIRTEEN, EDWARD KELLER HAD been a science fiction devotee for four years. He bubbled with Galactic enthusiasm.

His Aunt Clara, who had brought him up by rule and rod in pious memory of her deceased sister, wavered between toleration and exasperation. It appalled her to watch him grow so immersed in fantasy.

"Face reality, Eddie," she would say, angrily.

He would nod, but go on, "And I dreamed Martians were chasing me, see? I had a special death ray, but the atomic power unit was pretty low and —"

Every other breakfast consisted of eggs, toast, milk, and some such dream.

Aunt Clara said, severely, "Now, Eddie, one of these nights you won't be able to wake up out of your dream. You'll be trapped! Then what?"

She lowered her angular face close to his and glared.

Eddie was strangely impressed by his aunt's warning. He lay in bed, staring into the darkness. He wouldn't like to be trapped in a dream. It was always nice to wake up before it was too late. Like the time the dinosaurs were after him —

Suddenly he was out of bed, out of the house, out on the lawn, and he knew it was another dream.

The thought was broken by a vague thunder and a shadow that blotted the sun. He looked upward in astonishment and he could make out the human face that touched the clouds.

It was his Aunt Clara! Monstrously tall, she bent toward him in admonition, mast-like forefinger upraised, voice too guttural to be made out.

Eddie turned and ran in panic. Another Aunt Clara monster loomed up before him, voice rumbling.

He turned again, stumbling, panting, heading outward, outward.

He reached the top of the hill and stopped in horror. Off in the distance a hundred towering Aunt Claras were marching by. As the column passed, each line of Aunt Claras turned their heads sharply toward him and the thunderous bass rumbling coalesced into words:

"Face reality, Eddie. Face reality, Eddie."

Eddie threw himself sobbing to the ground. Please wake up, he begged himself. Don't be caught in this dream.

For unless he woke up, the worst science-fictional doom of all would have overtaken him. He would be trapped, *trapped*, in a world of giant aunts.

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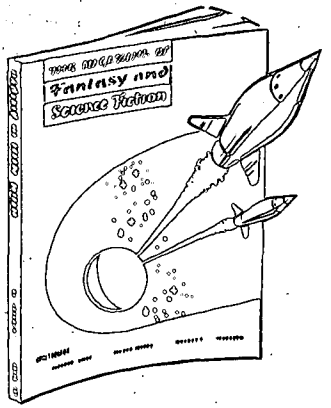

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